



Deathbound
Duke's Daughter:

**Erika
Aurelia**
and the
**Seafarer's
Ruins**

AUTHOR:
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“Ngh!
Not yet;
one more
match!”

Eduard Aurelia

Claus Hafan

Erika Aurelia

“Now this is
troubling.
You’re already
gasping for
air, Claus.
I’m getting
famished
myself, so
don’t you
think it’s
about time
we put this
to rest?”



Anne Hafan

“Stretch
like a
snake!
Fasten
like a
hawser!”



Zaratan



“Am I
allowed
to cry for
her?”

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Prologue: Erika Aurelia, the Villainess

“What could this mean...?”

Erika, daughter of Duke Aurelia, froze as stiff as a statue the moment she saw herself in the mirror.

Her hair, a deep honey gold, fell in soft, elegant curls. Her skin was pale as milk, while her cheeks were rose red. Though her features were youthful, a pair of prideful eyebrows loomed over her arrogant-looking, emerald eyes.

That’s... me?! No way! It can’t be!

The color of her hair, her skin, and her eyes... Everything about her was terribly off. Especially the thick, oh-so-familiar ringlets cascading down her back.

Indeed, the form reflected in the mirror was none other than the fantasy otome game *Liber Monstrorum: The Winter Maiden and the Phantasmic Beasts*’ resident pest of a villainess, Erika Aurelia.

No, wait! Why do I know what an otome game is?!

As the ground seemed to sway beneath her, Erika had to lean against the mirror for support. A sudden fountain of memories sprung forth, and she was assailed by its intoxicating waves.

Does this mean I’ve awakened to memories of a past life or something? Why does this world resemble a game I used to play?

While the idea seemed absurd, the little villainess’ eight years’ worth of memories informed her that this world truly was identical to that of *Liber Monstrorum*. Consequently, no matter how beautiful the face she saw in the mirror was, Erika could only take it as a sinister omen. It just *had* to be Erika Aurelia.

As a minor villain in *Liber Monstrorum*, Erika Aurelia not only berated and bullied the heroine after her enrollment in the Academy of Magic, but she died very early on in the game. Her death was the first of many in a trail of bizarre

murders.

Erika could die in a number of ways: transformed into a golden statue, devoured by a beast, drowned... the list went on. If the present Erika were simply to grow up and live her life as normal, all that awaited her was a pitiful death, which would then kick-start the serial murders that heightened the drama between the heroine and her chosen love interest.

That's the one thing I want to avoid. I refuse to just get killed out of nowhere. Not again.

“Again.” This word sparked another strange sensation for her. As the memories of a harsh past flooded back to her in vivid detail, Erika couldn’t help but close her eyes.

These were the final moments of her last memory. Light reflected in the corner of her eye. The next instant, a sharp impact. When she touched her hand to the heat she felt at her side, it came back soaked in a sticky coating of blood.

She was unable to run away.

Help wouldn’t come, scream as she may.

Unable to deny the knife as it plunged into her again and again, her consciousness slowly slipped away.

I see, so I died back then.

Her murderer had been a colleague from work. She had never really spoken to them, but she remembered hearing the words “You betrayed me” just before she was killed. Surely there was no reason for such an utterance; at most, Erika had lent them a spare umbrella on a rainy day.

The memories of her death triggered recollections of her other unreasonable personal tragedies as well.

In high school, she belonged to the earth science club. She had been the oasis in the desert, so to speak—the only female in the group—but she’d fully intended to enjoy her club activities regardless of the gender disparity.

Unfortunately, they remained mere intentions. Every other club member mistakenly came to believe she had fallen for him and convinced himself they

were an item. The rumors spread like wildfire before anyone noticed the contradiction.

What had followed was hell on earth. Paranoia infected the club like an epidemic, and it was effectively shut down. Backstabbing became an everyday occurrence.

She was called the “club crusher,” the “black widow,” and, less eloquently, “a slut.” One night, as she was walking home, one of the club members who took the rumors seriously struck her from behind, and she suffered a serious injury that required a long-term stay in the hospital.

Even after she was discharged, she was unable to clear her name. The scandal had grown simply too large for a timid girl like herself to stand up against.

Hahaha. How harsh.

Erika offered a powerless laugh.

In subsequent years, both in college and during her jobs, the same thing happened again and again on a smaller scale. Each time, she would endeavor to maintain her human relations, but disaster always found its way to her. Eventually, she got to the point where she simply refused to interact with anyone outside of work altogether.

During that period, it was video games that filled the void in her life. No matter how harsh the characters were, fiction couldn’t leave the screen to harm her. Games were far safer than reality, and she had fully immersed herself in her hobby up until the moment she died.

That being the case, the memories of Erika’s past life were little more than disastrous real-life experiences buried by game playthroughs.

Just how one-sided was my life experience?

She sneered. Try as she might to trace the threads of her memories, they only led her to one miserable episode after another. However, one thing she did remember was that she had never detested this particular villainess, Erika Aurelia.

Strong-willed, haughty, and assertive, Erika was so far removed from who she

was that the poor soul couldn't help but admire her. Apart from her malicious tendency to harass people, Erika Aurelia was close to her ideal.

Such a strong, straightforward girl wouldn't cause ill-natured men to misunderstand her, to stalk her, and then to stab her. Sure, normal men would keep their distance, but that was an irrelevant fact after she had experienced so many of the same incidents.

Maybe, just maybe, I can do my best without giving up this time. Right! I've got it! I just have to change this dark romantic fantasy into a laid-back slice-of-life!

Still, she had to ask herself whether or not that was actually possible. At the very least, so long as she didn't die under mysterious circumstances, she got the feeling she could live far more freely now than in her past life.

Not a bad option, Erika concluded.

Surely the clues to her survival were buried somewhere in her memory. Why did Erika Aurelia have to die? That was because she trampled over the lives of the other characters. As long as she avoided that, perhaps she could find a way out of her fatal predicament.

The dark pasts of each romance option were the death flags Erika raised for herself. In that case, she just had to put her all into breaking down the flags.

But before that, there was one thing she had to confirm. Erika feared the possibility that these new memories were all just a fabrication. If they were not the memories carried over from reincarnation, if she had simply lost her sanity and dived into delusion, what good were they?

How could she verify the authenticity of her memories? Erika pressed her fingers to her temple.

"Are you alright, Erika?" An abrupt voice from behind caused her to raise her head.

The voice belonged to the villainess' brother, Eduard Aurelia. He was the eldest son of Duke Aurelia and a romance option in the game. Twelve years older than his sister, he shared her blonde hair and green eyes; unlike Erika, however, who gave the impression of a rose with thorns, Eduard had a sweet,

gentle countenance.

He must have been worried after seeing Erika groaning in front of the mirror.

Come to think of it, this is my brother's study, Erika recalled.

This was as good an opportunity as any. If she confirmed several pieces of information that Erika Aurelia had no way of knowing, perhaps she could measure the authenticity of her memories. Her knowledgeable brother was the perfect person for the job.

But what would she ask? As she pondered this in silence, Eduard stooped down to peer into her agonized face.

"You're not looking too good. Are you okay?"

"I appreciate your concern, my dear brother, but I'll be fine. I've just grown a little weary."

"I see. You *were* just reading all sorts of difficult books, after all. Here, have something sweet." He reached into a small box on the table, picked out a little parcel, and peeled off the wrapper. "Here, say aaah."

Erika opened her mouth, and her tongue was greeted by a truffle of fine chocolate. Eduard greatly enjoyed spoiling his cute younger sister.

"Is it tasty?"

"It is."

"Very good. You're such a good girl, Erika."

A first-rate smile on his face, Eduard gently passed a hand through her hair.

With a brother like this, can anyone really blame me for growing up a little pampered?

A slight blush bloomed on her cheeks. It was definitely pleasant to be spoiled by her beloved brother, but right now, she needed to focus on gathering intel.

"Hey, Eduard?"

"Hm? What is it? Do you want another chocolate?"

"I'll get fat if I eat so much before supper."

“Oh, that’s fair.”

“It’s not about the chocolate; there’s something I would like to ask you.”

“What is it? Please, do keep your questions to things I might know.”

Elated to be relied on by his adorable sister, Eduard rapturously smiled from ear to ear. It pained Erika’s heart somewhat. The questions she needed to ask would cast a cloud over his enthusiasm. Regardless, she couldn’t avoid bringing up the topic that served as the basis for the developments in *Liber Monstrorum*.

“I was just thinking that I’d like to make friends with other girls.”

“Yes, of course! That sounds wonderful.”

“As I recall, Duke Lucanlandt has a daughter my age. Do you think I could become friends with her?”

While Eduard kept his smile, he seemed hard-pressed to answer. Erika could sense both confusion and sorrow in his expression. He was clearly mulling over how he was supposed to explain this to a young girl.

It seemed she’d hit the mark right off the bat. While Eduard’s expression left a prickling pain in her chest, it was the one she had expected. That reaction was evidence that the incident that would later be called the “Lycan Massacre” had already occurred.

“I’m sorry. That girl has gone somewhere far, far away, so she can’t be your friend.”

“Is that true? A shame. Where has she gone?”

“I’ll tell you when you’re a little older, Erika,” Eduard said, softly patting her on the head.

The sad look on his face filled her with the urge to apologize, but now one thing was clear: Chloe, the daughter of Duke Lucanlandt and protagonist of *Liber Monstrorum*, was currently missing, and no one had any hopes she would return alive. Eduard’s reaction matched up with her prior knowledge.

Erika ignored the heavy air and threw out her next question.

“Then... Duke Hafan has a girl one year younger than me, doesn’t he?”

This time, Eduard nodded with relief. “That’s right. Truth be told, you’ll be meeting her soon. House Hafan will be paying us a visit tomorrow.”

“Is that true? Oh, I simply can’t wait!” Erika replied, beaming.

She now had two pieces of evidence in hand. She was certain that during House Hafan’s visit, Erika was fated to become the trigger for an outrageous incident.

It hadn’t happened yet, so she should be able to avoid it. While she had to curse her ill fortune since she only had one day to go, she also knew to count her blessings, as she had made it in the nick of time.

Erika escaped the study using supper as an excuse. She walked down the corridor alone, slowly allowing the fact that this was the world of *Liber Monstrorum* to sink in. At the same time, she steeled her resolve.

The world she now lived in was one crossed by many a monster, lycanthrope, and vampyre—a world of phantasmic beasts.

Chapter 1: The Spring Palace

1

As the name implied, the Spring Palace was where House Aurelia took up residence in springtime.

“Lady Erika! Where are you, Lady Erika?”

The voices of maids searching for Erika echoed throughout the spacious white and gold halls. It was the day House Hafan, one of the nation’s most influential noble houses, was due to visit. As the eldest daughter of House Aurelia, Erika would have to attend the welcoming banquet.

On this terribly important day, Erika was stifling her breath as she hid away in the study.

Real sorry... I need to prepare just a little more. Sorry, everyone!

Safely out of sight, Erika continued her research. At the moment, she wanted to know more about this world’s prominent nobles, Duke Hafan included. She needed to cram in all the necessary information before her time was up.

Once she felt the maids’ voices had grown distant enough, Erika spread a map and some books across the carpet.



Lucanlandt was a country of harsh winters. It lay on the northern edge of the Ichthyes continent and was also called the “Land of Ice and Snow.”

Erika knew of the tragedy that had taken place in these lands; she had seen it in a past playthrough.

A member of House Lucanlandt had gone insane and murdered the entire household; not even the servants were spared. According to rumors, it wasn’t insanity but lycanthropy which had consumed them.

Truth be told, there had been a single survivor of the Lycan Massacre: Chloe

Lucanlandt, who would later become the heroine of *Liber Monstrorum*.

After the incident, Chloe was taken in by an affluent merchant, and her name became Chloe Cloacina. Seven years from now, in the fall of her fourteenth year, she would enroll in the Academy of Magic in the city of Lindis and get swept up in yet another bizarre event.

There were seven possible love interests. Each hero had his own individual storyline, but only one was available from the start. It was the sort of game where a new route would unlock every time the previous one was cleared.

In her past life, Erika had only been partway through the game; she had just finished the first two routes and started the third. Her tragic stabbing had occurred only three days after the game's release, putting a permanent halt to her progress.

Hahaha, how harsh.

Erika heaved a sigh and decided to focus on compiling what little knowledge she had. She spread out the large sheet of parchment and peered at the world map.

The continent of Ichthyes was primarily divided into four regions: Lucanlandt in the north, Hafan in the east, Ignitia in the south, and Aurelia—the territory of Erika's father—in the west. The regions all retained the names they'd had as sovereign nations. At present, Ignitia had brought them together into a united kingdom, with the former royal lineages of Lucanlandt, Hafan, and Aurelia falling to the status of retainers despite maintaining control of their lands.

Lucanlandt was the oldest and the first to be inhabited by humans. The cold, harsh climate had forged a brave and sincere temperament in its people. This region was home to an abundance of daring swordsmen and skilled medics. As the magic of this world did not branch into healing, the treatment of heavy injuries was often based on medicinal practices with roots in Lucanlandt.

Hafan had been developed by the second wave of people to migrate to Ichthyes. A majority of it was covered in dense woodland, while the rest was composed of grassy plains and grain fields. Hafan was known for turning out talented magicians in great numbers.

In Ignitia, knights rode dragons rather than horses. The people of Ignitia had come up from a continent in the south during a time when the wicked nation of Casquetia ruled over Ichthyas with an iron fist. Ignitia destroyed Casquetia with the immense power of their dragon knights and gained total control of all the nations. They were proud conquerors indeed.

Aurelia had been the last to emerge. It was a country of alchemists formed by the Seafaring Tribe. While it was not yet possible to turn base metals into gold, ever since they'd stumbled upon a large, natural gold vein, they had become the continent's most affluent region.

The current ruler, Duke Ernst Aurelia, was Erika's father. The Duchess had died before Erika turned three, and Ernst remained a widower, never remarrying.

Whatever memories Erika had of her mother were terribly vague. The warmth when she held Erika in her arms, her gentle singing voice, the soft and loving sensation of her fingers when they traced her daughter's face... Erika could only recall such fragmentary snippets. She attributed this to the difficulty for memories to take root in such tender years, but it still saddened her that they were few and far between.

"Lady Erika! Are you there, Lady Erika?"

Once again, the voices of the maids searching for her echoed from beyond the door. Erika had nearly drifted off to a realm of reminiscence, but she shook off such thoughts, knowing now wasn't the time.

I don't have time to get emotional.

Very soon, an event would take place that would raise her death flag.

She continued making her way through the books, bolstering her knowledge as she gathered information on Aurelia and Hafan. As she was fishing through a pile of documents, she heard the sound of the door opening behind her.

"Oh, there you are. You shouldn't trouble the maids too much, Erika. What's wrong?"

It was Eduard. Erika hurriedly returned her books to the shelf. She couldn't exactly tell him she was gathering information to avoid her inevitable demise.

“Hello, Eduard. I wasn’t trying to hide or anything. I just had some business to attend to.”

“Hmm, what sort of business?”

“It’s a secret.”

When she did her best to play the part of a spoiled, sulking child, Eduard’s expression softened.

“Hehe, it must be important. Did you finish your business yet?”

“I did.”

Eduard smiled gently and held out his hand.

“Then let’s get going. They’re all waiting for you.”

Today she would meet someone closely connected with her own death. If her memories hadn’t caught up in time, Erika feared she would be barreling straight toward irreversible tragedy and a fated conclusion. Just one more day, and perhaps she would have made a mistake she could never take back.

House Hafan contained the first love interest of *Liber Monstrorum*. His name was Claus Hafan.

From what Erika could remember, Claus was a sixteen-year-old, omnipotent magician; he had sharp, imposing features and a cold personality. Though hailed as a genius, he was filled with indelible regret and general disillusionment with humanity. His eyes were dark... So terribly dark. Even though his bio listed his eye color as blue, his in-game art depicted them as deeply, boundlessly black.

Why had Claus become such a person? Well, it was because he thought his younger sister, Anne, had died because of his own mistake.

However, it had actually been Erika who caused Anne’s death. To be more precise, Erika had, just for a bit of fun, invited Anne to a very hazardous place. Even if it wasn’t directly, one could say it was Erika’s fault that Anne had died.

And that kinda leads to my death six years later.

Erika recalled the scenario from *Liber Monstrorum*.

The messenger owls had all been killed, and after the city of Lindis, home to the Academy of Magic, was cut off from the rest of the world, Erika was the first to be found dead, her entire body turned to gold. This was the first storyline in the game, the onset of the Gold Rush Murders.

In *Liber Monstrorum*, six years before the scenario began, Anne was possessed by an evil spirit in the Aurelia Ruins and perished. The spirit belonged to a legendary alchemist who had been the first to successfully create a philosopher's stone only to be killed by their compatriots, who were after their secrets.

Driven by revenge, homesickness, love, and hate, the spirit would go on to cause a series of mysterious deaths at the academy. Six years later, Anne, revived after fully assimilating with the alchemist's spirit, targeted Erika, the one responsible for her death.

Yes, I can really see where Anne is coming from here.

If someone had lured her out and let her die, she would definitely have come back as an evil spirit to curse them to death.

Today happened to be the day she was fated to meet the Hafan duo, Claus and Anne. Naturally, Erika had no intention of inviting Anne out anywhere dangerous, but there was no telling what would happen. She couldn't rule out the possibility that her inner villainess would awaken the moment she met them.

If I become the sort of evil lady who leads people into traps...

The thought made her silence all the more solemn.

"Erika, are you okay? You're not looking too well." Kind as always, Eduard touched a worried hand to her brow.

Thank you, dear brother of mine.

She quietly offered her heartfelt gratitude. Her past-life memories were making her act all too suspiciously, yet Eduard was interacting with her as tenderly as ever. She didn't want to worry her brother any further.

Erika desperately formed a natural smile. "I'm perfectly alright, Eduard. It's

just... I'm meeting the Hafans for the first time, so I'm a little anxious."

"Be at ease, Erika. The people from the east are calm and gentle. Ah, that's right; Duke Hafan has a son who's two years older than you, you know."

Truth be told, Hafan nobles were known to be callous and xenophobic, but Eduard had told his sister a little white lie to give her courage. Realizing this, Erika smiled even wider so he wouldn't have to worry.

"Yes, I already heard from Father. Claus and Anne, correct?"

"Precisely. I do hope you all get along."

"Me too."

Talking with her brother allowed her to finally regain her composure.

I have to do my best! she scolded herself.

She'd now had all of her past-life memories for two days running. While she hadn't set up any decent countermeasures yet, she couldn't let herself be crushed by the pressure before it even began.

"Oh, that's right. I've got something for you. This pendant is charmed to inspire courage in the wearer, so even a shy girl like you can surely make friends." With that, he hung a pendant around Erika's neck. It gave off a faint blue glow.

This is a star crystal.

Its light reflected off of Erika's limpid emerald eyes.



Star crystal was a mineral unique to Aurelia. It was also known as the Sailor's Star. This special ore would resonate with even the feeblest of magical energy, glowing brighter the darker its surroundings.

A fragment the size of a pinky nail placed in a glass tube would create a lamp with the same degree of brightness as a candle. Such star crystal lamps could be found stationed all over the Spring Palace.

However, Erika had never seen a flawless crystal so large as the one dangling from her neck.

"What's this?"

"You have to keep it a secret from Father. I found it while exploring the Seafarer's Ruins with a friend. I thought it might be a nice present for you, so I had it faceted and made into a necklace. Outside of those ruins, you won't find a star crystal of this size and quality anywhere in the world."

"Huh?!" Erika froze the moment she heard him mention the Seafarer's Ruins. "Thank you, Eduard. But Father has told us time and time again that those ruins are dangerous."

"That's why you have to keep it a secret, okay?"

The Seafarer's Ruins were the site of Anne's death and the resting place of the ancient evil spirit in *Liber Monstrorum*, and this very star crystal was the reason Claus and Anne had snuck into the Seafarer's Ruins together. Anne was entranced by such a beautiful gemstone, so the young and wicked Erika spitefully directed her to the dangerous wreckage.

This scene, and even the voice track, played back in Erika's head.

"This is a precious stone I received from my brother, Eduard! If you want one so badly, then find it yourself!"

Erika clenched the gemstone. This was the real death flag. Though she was touched by the urge to throw it out the window right this instant, she maintained control of herself. She couldn't treat the gift her brother and his friend had found for her so callously right in front of his eyes.

No matter what, she had to make sure it went unnoticed during Duke Hafan's

visit. Keeping her internal unrest hidden beneath the surface, Erika cautiously and calmly proposed, “It pleases me greatly, Eduard, but won’t Father notice it?”

“Hmm, I suppose you’re right. I guess it won’t work out.”

“Perhaps I might hide it on the inside of my dress?”

“Ah, I see! That should be fine.”

One down, Erika thought, feeling the sensation of her first death flag being plucked away.

2

In the entrance hall of the Spring Palace, Duke Aurelia’s household awaited the arrival of House Hafan.

Erika’s father, Ernst, was in his forties, his swept-back blond hair dappled with white. He sported a short, well-kempt goatee. Both his features and personality were reminiscent of Eduard. He tended to be terribly soft on his family, but he was also a proud military man.

Lined up beside him were Eduard and Erika in full formal dress.

After some time, the Hafan couple and their two children stepped in.

When Duke Hafan—who was only in his thirties—stood next to Duke Aurelia, the contrast was staggering. Duke Hafan gave off a rather sharp impression, though his features were fine and youthful. His black hair and gray eyes matched his pale gray magician’s robe. While his clothing seemed plain and frugal at a glance, closer inspection revealed intricate silver embroidery, making it a classy, eye-catching ensemble.

The duchess was in her late twenties, and she was a woman who brought the words “robust” and “spry” to mind. She wore a light-blue, unornamented dress, and her black hair was tied up neatly over her deep blue eyes. Anyone who saw her would consider her countenance blessed with both high-class beauty and endearing charm.

Then came the firstborn, Claus, and his little sister, Anne.

Claus wore a black formal uniform with an abundance of silver thread; Anne wore a prim and proper white dress decorated with silver embroidery. The two of them strongly took after their father, but they had their mother's eyes. Handsome faces, straight black hair like fine silk, and vivid blue irises.

Erika was surprised to see that Claus was completely different from how he appeared in *Liber Monstrorum*. He was lacking his signature dark aura and instead appeared to be a healthy young boy whose expression befitted a child his age. His strong-willed eyes made him seem quite dignified.

If he grows up without incident, thought Erika, he will become a handsome, refreshing young man.

Once formalities were exchanged, Duke Hafan and Duke Aurelia made for the parlor. They had much to discuss regarding the reason for this visit—the development of the silver vein that lay on the border between their territories and the resources in the forests that surrounded it.

The duchess was shown to the guest rooms by Eduard, while Erika and the Hafan siblings were told to have fun playing in the Spring Palace gardens. It was the season where the Spring Palace came to life as the plants all across its estate flowered spectacularly. The most beautiful space on the palace grounds was their Grand Garden of One Hundred Blooms, which was composed of a knot garden, a parterre garden, and the rose gardens.

Erika turned to Claus and Anne with a smile.

“Allow me to be your guide through our—”

“Look here, woman. I have absolutely no intention of getting along with you.”

Her smile grew stiff. What sort of ten-year-old boy referred to a girl two years his junior as “woman”...?

No, wait, Liber Monstrorum's Claus wasn't much better.

Claus hadn't just been cold and dark; he had also been pompous and sadistic.

I can't let myself be led astray by his looks, Erika reminded herself.

“Don't get me wrong; it's not you. I can't stand this entire visit! Why must my father come all the way out here to gab with some uppity neophytes in the

west?”

“I don’t know how to respond to that...”

Erika was truly at a loss for words. The reason this discussion was taking place in the Spring Palace was that it contained transfer gates to various parts of the western region, making it the ideal place to survey the mines and forests.

Transfer gates were a type of spatial circle—a magical door of sorts that connected spaces by means of ley lines. During a war many years ago, all the ley lines and transfer gates in the west had been destroyed. The Seafaring Tribe had eventually restored them, and thus House Aurelia held a monopoly over teleportation throughout the region.

This was something both dukes’ families should have been well aware of. What’s more, the Seafaring Tribe had arrived on the continent over six hundred years ago. Calling them “neophytes” simply made her confused.

“Hmph, I have no interest in this place. Your flowers are worthless.”

“Brother, please don’t act so spoiled. You’re being rude to Miss Erika!”

Just as Erika was contemplating how to reach an amicable settlement, she was abruptly thrust a helping hand from Claus’ younger sister.

“Erika is offering to show us around the Spring Palace’s famous gardens! How could you be so ungrateful?”

“Yeah, I don’t want to be seen with you either, Anne. If I stick around you, I’ll catch your weakness.”

“I see. Very well, then, Claus; do as you please. I’ll give Anne a tour of the gardens,” Erika said, parrying his utter disregard with a smile.

That’s right; he was that kind of guy. I see, I see. I knew it; the opposite sex is best observed through a computer screen, she thought to herself while maintaining her cool.

Still, given his unhealthy attachment to his sister in the first scenario of *Liber Monstrorum*, Claus’ attitude took Erika by surprise.

“Naturally. I’ll be doing just that.”

And so, Claus left Erika and Anne behind, returning to the palace as quickly as possible.

Yeah, do what you want, but what exactly are you supposed to do by yourself in someone else's house?

Flustered as she was, Erika decided it didn't really matter. Entertaining Anne was—for appearance's sake—her objective. Not keeping Claus in a good mood. Her ulterior motive, and top priority, was to keep Anne safe and make sure she was never tipped off about the existence of the Seafarer's Ruins.

When Erika shifted her gaze to Anne, the girl apologized on her brother's behalf. "My humblest apologies, Erika. My brother has committed a terrible discourtesy."

"It's alright, I don't mind. I do hope we get along, Anne."

"Likewise."

Erika couldn't help but smile a little wider. She was fostering quite a favorable impression of the courteous young girl. Upon seeing Erika's surprisingly gentle expression, Anne let out a sigh of relief.

"I was quite looking forward to this. I've heard all sorts of rumors. Are the gardens here really so vast that it would be impossible to see everything at once?"

"Oh, is it your first time seeing this sort of garden?"

"Yes, the east has no gardens with the trees trimmed so low. It all seems so unusual! I now see that beauty can take on all sorts of shapes."

"I know what you mean."

"I can also see that our cultural differences show in which gardens we prefer," Anne added with a soft smile.

In Hafan, where the trees were sacred, there were plenty of natural havens, but few made with meticulous landscaping. By contrast, Aurelians preferred well-planned, artificial beauty. For Anne to perceive a cultural difference simply from the layout of a garden at the age of seven, Erika determined she was quite a clever girl.

“Ah, what’s that flower?!”

The peculiarities of the garden’s flowers kept Anne’s interest in flux. Whenever the younger girl had a question, Erika politely and dutifully provided the answer. After venturing through the knot garden, which consisted solely of evergreens, they moved on to the parterre garden with its wide variety of blooming flowers. The different make of each individual garden was a feast for Anne’s eyes.

“It’s lavender. We’ve selectively bred it to get these large flowers.”

“The pale purple is stunning... Ooh, what about that white, layered flower?” Anne next took a liking to the rose garden even further down the path.

“That’s a breed of species rose. Shall I tell the gardener to pluck some of the flowers you like?”

“Would that be alright?”

“Of course. Have as many flowers as you like.”

To Erika, hearing out the wishes of a small child wasn’t the worst thing in the world. In fact, she was always of the opinion that she should be overly sweet on kids, especially the well-mannered ones.

“Are you sure? Is it really, *really* okay to take them?”

“Why, Anne, you’re our precious guest,” Erika said with an enticing, elegant smile. Anne’s cheeks flushed as red as poppies.

“Thank you.”

She’s honest and cute, unlike Claus over there, thought Erika as she narrowed her eyes. *But, well, I guess not being upfront is Claus’ selling point.*

There was a demand for this type of guy, or at least, there had been in her former world. One by one, Erika’s brain revived memories of a world where Anne had passed away.

I definitely can’t let that happen. This girl can’t be allowed to die.

Of course, her motivation partially stemmed from her own survival instinct. Erika unequivocally had no desire to die from Anne’s curse after she was

possessed by an evil spirit.

3

Anne's Erika-guided tour of the garden ended without issue. She seemed greatly satisfied to be able to see the peculiar ways flowers were modified in Aurelia.

On the way back, Erika begged the gardener to prune a few select flowers and use them to decorate Anne's guest room. Seeing them would surely delight her.

After parting with Anne, Erika decided to return to her own room before the banquet, only to come across an unexpected sight along the way.

"Ngh! Not yet; one more match!"

"Now this is troubling. You're already gasping for air, Claus. I'm getting famished myself, so don't you think it's about time we put this to rest?"

She had stumbled upon Claus and Eduard competing in the inner courtyard. Claus was armed with the longstaff of a Hafan magician, and Eduard wielded a favorite wand of Aurelian alchemists.

Judging by the atmosphere, Eduard was the clear victor.

I'd expect no less from my brother. No, wait, how about letting up a bit against a child; you're twenty years old.

How very, very immature of him. She sighed upon noticing that the turf of the inner courtyard had been almost completely stripped away.

"Oh, hello, Erika. How are things going on your end?" The moment Eduard noticed her, he immediately called out with an expression that read, "I'm saved." Erika saw Claus trembling in the corner of her eye.

He probably didn't want anyone to see his overwhelming loss.

Feeling just a little bit sorry for him, Erika pretended not to see.

"Simply wonderful. Anne seemed terribly pleased. Were the two of you having a match?"

"Yes, Claus here said he wanted to put his abilities to the test. Dear me, he

really is something. He had me on the defensive the entire time.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Erika smiled, but in her heart, she retorted, *How very modest. You must take care, Eduard; excess modesty simply turns to cynicism.*

It wasn't difficult for her to discern what had actually happened. In all likelihood, Eduard had nonchalantly and accurately dispelled and disintegrated every offensive spell Claus had thrown at him. No doubt, Claus came out feeling terribly humiliated from the ordeal.

“Grrr!”

The conversation between the siblings made Claus a mess of quivering scarlet. Erika already felt restless. No matter how she looked at it, Claus was at a clear disadvantage in this particular bout.

Generally speaking, the freedom and variety of spells a magician could use far exceeded that of an alchemist. However, this placed a larger burden on the body and mind. The spells constructed by a magician were generated from their own body and immediately put to use. An immature body or an unstable mind would obstruct the process. On the other hand, magic generated by strong emotions could be frighteningly powerful.

By contrast, an alchemist assembled spells from various materials, which were then concentrated and stored in a tool, such as a wand. The spell could later be called from the tool when necessary. Physical and mental health were both irrelevant; the problem was simply whether or not one had properly prepared for the situation.

A magician's chant and an alchemist's loaded wand apparently used very different types of mana—magical energy, that is—but the same spell would generally have the same range and effect. That being said, between an alchemist who was sufficiently charged and a magician who was physically immature, the result was clear from the get-go.

Incidentally, Erika was completely inept at magic. An unskilled alchemist was a rarity in the modern-day House Aurelia. This was not so easily rectified, as she could neither construct spells nor concentrate them into a wand. She *did* have

mana, for what it was worth, but she didn't have the constitution to use it.

At most, she could operate the tools produced by other alchemists. However, doing so didn't require her to be an alchemist herself. This was something anyone could do as long as they had the proper equipment.

This really is harsh.

Erika grew glum as she carelessly spiraled into self-deprecation. Though her capacity for magic was slim, she could still make a golem by physically carving sigils into ceramic or the like, which just barely allowed her to call herself an alchemist. This was her sole salvation.

She would be fine while under the protection of her father and brother, but she worried what would become of her once she enrolled in the academy.

Indeed, thinking about the future put a damper on Erika's spirits, but she was quick to change gears. If she didn't handle this situation properly, she wouldn't have a future to begin with.

"It's almost time for the banquet. Shouldn't the two of you be getting ready?"

"You heard her, Claus. We've run out of time, so we'll have to call this match a draw," said Eduard, still completely unfazed.

"I-I won't lose next time," grumbled Claus, his body still in a frenzy.

"Oh, that's right. I received a summons from my friend a moment ago. I'll have to return to Lindis right after the banquet."

"What?!"

"I'm really sorry, Claus."

This was the first Erika had heard of his urgent voyage as well.

The city of Lindis was right at the center of Ichthyes, and Eduard was a student at the Academy of Magic there. At this rate, Eduard would be running off with an unsettled score.

"That's quite sudden. Shouldn't you stay here at least for as long as House Hafan is with us?"

"It's urgent business, you see. Oh, but please do get along with Claus in my

stead, Erika.”

“Huh? Um, yes, of course.”

Eduard scurried off, leaving her stuck with the disagreeable boy. She stole an awkward glance at him, only to find he was blatantly glaring at her. Erika tried smiling, wondering what she should do, but this only intensified his scorn.

“That’s unfortunate. My brother is a very busy person.” She tried her best not to be intimidated by his attitude, making some curt small-talk.

“I see. So it wasn’t just that he didn’t want to deal with me.”

“Yes. He might seem elusive, but he does his best to be sincere with these things.”

“Uh-huh.” Claus dropped his gaze from Erika, apparently lost in thought.

After taking another peek at his handsome features, now shadowed by the evening sun, Erika was about to be back on her way when a voice called out behind her.

“Umm... I’m sorry for being so rude.”

Erika turned back to see Claus making a timid, awkward face.

“That’s alright, Claus.”

“It appears I was too weak to talk about catching weakness from anyone.”

He was acting like a kicked puppy. Just what had Eduard done to him to bring about this sudden change? Erika was at a loss for words.

“You’re his sister, so you must be a skilled alchemist in your own right.”

“No, I have absolutely no talent for alchemy.”

“What is with you Aurelians and your humility?”

Having spoken after Eduard, Erika realized how shameless she must have sounded.

“No, it’s true in my case. Unfortunately, the mana in my body to chant spells, or cast any magic at all, is wholly obstructed.”

“I-Is that so? My condolences.”

Erika lowered her gaze, a bitter smile on her face. It was a harsh condition to have in Aurelia, but it would probably be even worse in Hafan. Claus' eyes had all of a sudden softened and become compassionate.

Absorbed in her self-reflection, Erika was now sincerely and miserably worried about her future.

Perhaps the Erika in Liber Monstrorum went astray due to her inferiority complex.

For a few moments, she contemplated the paths in life she could have tread.

"But, ah... I don't mean to pry—this is just a simple question—but I sense traces of an unusual magic about you. If it isn't *your* magic, then what might be the source?"

What could it be? thought Erika, glancing over her body and dress.

"Oh dear, I haven't noticed it in the slightest."

There were times where Erika would use an item to cast defensive magic on herself, but right now, she was inside the Aurelian Spring Palace. She had no need to use such magic on her home turf.

"Well, it bothers me. My apologies, but could I inspect you up close?"

"Hm? Yes, of course."

Claus stood right in front of her and began staring, long and hard.

"I see. Found it."

Was that really enough? Erika was rather impressed. *As expected of the future omnipotent magician.*

"It's coming from your chest. You must be wearing an accessory with some sort of special magic."

Oh, that thing! Erika finally recalled that she had hidden the star crystal necklace under her dress.

"I received it from my brother this morning. I didn't know it contained magic."

While she couldn't show it to Anne, Erika determined Claus would act sensibly enough and slipped the necklace out over her clothes.

It was evening by now, and as the light grew dim, the stone filled with the glowing blue light one might see from a star.

“It’s beautiful. I see, so this is Aurelia’s famous star crystal...”

“He told me it was a charm to make friends,” Erika said doubtfully.

Maybe it wasn’t just a good-luck charm. Did he seriously cast a spell on it?

As a matter of fact, Claus was staring into the star crystal as if he were enchanted.

“This isn’t your brother’s magic. Forget that—I’ve never sensed anything like this before. It’s not of Hafan, and it doesn’t seem to be of Aurelia either.”

“I heard he found it in the Seafarer’s Ruins. It might be something ancient.”

“The Seafarer’s Ruins, eh?”

“Yes, they’re quite famous in Aurelia.”

“Hmm, how intriguing.”

Oh crap, thought Erika. The mere fact that the keyword had slipped into the open air felt like a prelude to something awful.

“But why didn’t my brother notice the magic cast on this stone, I wonder?”

“It was so feeble, I thought I was just imagining it. The fact that it’s magic *I’m* unfamiliar with means it’s considerably rare.”

As a skilled magician, Claus perpetually had a spell called Glámr-Sight deployed. It allowed him to sense traces of magic as visual phenomena. His eyes, enchanted with the spell, were precisely what had allowed him to notice the necklace’s magic in the first place.

Alchemists of the west couldn’t react to situations beyond what they had prepared for, so Eduard’s inability to notice was no mystery.

Even so, Claus sure is confident in himself, Erika thought. He had yet to enroll in the Academy of Magic, yet he claimed to have knowledge of all its forms, Eastern and Western.

“Still, it’s pretty amazing that you know so much about it, Claus.”

“Naturally. That’s why I’ve been training every day.”

Claus’ eyes were sparkling. Erika wondered if true talent came from intense hard work and investment that had transformed into insatiable greed.

“I want to check out the ruins. Will you take me there?”

I have nothing but bad feelings about this.

A detestable chill ran down her spine. She inferred that she was about to raise her own death flag. In *Liber Monstrorum*, Anne was the one who entered the ruins and was consequently possessed by an evil spirit. If Claus went in her place, then perhaps it was Claus who would curse her to death.

“I can’t. It’s too dangerous.”

“But Eduard went there without issue, did he not? Are you saying I’m incapable?”

Whoa there. I rubbed his rivalry the wrong way.

Erika was immediately filled with regret. She couldn’t just tell him, “That’s right.” It would only hurt his pride and make the situation even worse.

4

Erika just barely managed to elude Claus’ interest in the ruins before making way for the banquet. As she had expected, the boy brought up the topic right at the height of their meal, but Duke Hafan issued him a terribly dignified reprimand. There was no way he could give a boy like Claus permission to enter such a dangerous place. Meanwhile, Erika herself feigned ignorance.

Despite Eduard’s nonchalant air, she detected some confusion on his part. Of course, Erika had made sure to properly put a gag order on Claus so that Eduard wouldn’t be scolded for his own exploits in the ruins.

When the banquet was over, Eduard headed to the cellar of the Spring Palace. He planned to use the transfer gate there to head to the Royal Academy of Magic in Lindis at the center of the continent. Despite its name, the academy wasn’t limited solely to magic; its studies encompassed medical practices and alchemy as well.

Transfer gates could be found beneath various important structures. They connected spaces with magic, allowing users to warp between them. Operating a gate required the use of a consumable item known as a one-time key, one of which Eduard had received from his father after dinner. One-time keys were managed by whichever ruling noble was in charge of the gate, and they could not be reproduced by anyone else.

Erika met Eduard in the hall once he had finished collecting his belongings. If she had learned anything from Claus, it was that the crystal Eduard had given her was imbued with some form of magic.

“Eduard, I do apologize for stopping you when you’re in such a hurry, but could I ask you about this necklace?”

“Hmm, what about the necklace, Erika?”

“Claus seemed to recognize the magic cast on it. Awfully rare magic, he said.”

“Rare magic, is it...? Let me see.”

Eduard stared at the crystal, a faint wrinkle on his brow. He crouched down on the spot and swung open the leather briefcase in his hands.

“That bag was your Wunderkammer?”

The repository which housed all the items an alchemist had prepared was known as a Wunderkammer. It seemed the inner space of his briefcase had undergone some expansions, and Eduard had set up shop inside.

“Getting space-tampering magic was *pretty* expensive, you know,” Eduard muttered, looking out into the distance.

“Right...”

Just the wands and materials he had stored inside would be worth a considerable sum already.

How much money did you waste on that, Eduard?

Erika did her best to estimate. She couldn’t come to an exact number, but it was plausible that her brother would have to sell off one or two of the silver veins he’d inherited to pay it off.

“Now, let’s look into this.”

Out of the numerous wands in the bag, Eduard selected one made from a branch of sugar maple. There was an emerald embedded at its tip. The ornaments of its handle made use of nacre to imitate the sheen of a peacock, meaning the central wick was probably peacock feather.

The wand was just about as long as a conductor’s baton. Such a small tool could presumably hold around fifty casts, though a wand of the highest quality could hold over a hundred.

While wands could be terribly convenient, a single wand could only contain a single spell. If one wanted to be prepared for all sorts of situations, they would have to carry many different varieties of wands at a time. That was what made preparation so important to western alchemists.

Eduard vigorously waved the wand like he was raising an orchestra from the dead. A magic circle deployed around him, enveloping him in a pale green light, before condensing around his eyes. With that, he was temporarily placed under the effects of Glámr-Sight.

What this world considered an alchemist’s magic required quite a bit of grunt work.

“I see. This is interesting,” Eduard said after his eyes had been fixed on the star crystal for some time. With Glámr-Sight, he could see everything about the spell: its construction, range, effective time, creator, and practitioner.

“How does it look?”

“I found it in the Seafarer’s Ruins, so I assumed it would be from that time period... But it’s actually even older than that. At the very least, it’s from before Ignitia came from the south and took over the continent.”

The founders of Aurelia, the Seafaring Tribe, arrived roughly 650 years ago. 150 years prior to that, the founding king of Ignitia brought ruin to Casquetia. That made the magic at least 800 years old.

As legend had it, Casquetia was a country of vampyres. It had been a land of darkness where the vampyric royalty and nobility ruled over the humans like they were livestock. This meant there was a high possibility the magic cast on

the stone had originally belonged to a Casquetian vampyre. How detestably sinister.

“So you’re saying it’s a vampyre’s magic?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

By now, vampyres were no more than a specter from eight centuries ago. They had all long since died out. However, Erika had heard that in the routes of *Liber Monstrorum* she had never conquered, vampyres still lurked in waiting.

“Luckily, it should be safe for us. Westerners such as ourselves aren’t really sensitive to this sort of magic. On the other hand, it will probably have a tangible influence on anyone from the east or the north.”

“What sort of magic is it?”

“It’s close to a charm spell, but more... Yes, it seems to be magic that brings out one’s desires. I believe I should hang onto the stone for a little longer.”
Eduard tucked the necklace into his briefcase.

A magic that brings out desires?

Erika recalled the tragedy of Claus and Anne. Why had Anne, who was usually so very courteous, yearned so desperately for the necklace Erika wore? Could that have been a desire dragged out by the curse cast upon it?

As Erika fell into an anxious silence, Eduard kindly called her back to her senses.

“Erika, I don’t know how useful it will be, but please take this.”

What he handed her was the key to his repository. For an alchemist, his storage of items was just as valuable as his life. It was likely a spare key, but it was still extremely precious.

“This is the key to your storage, isn’t it? Eduard, why are you giving me something so important?”

“You look terribly anxious. I need to go to Lindis for a friend. Honestly, I would love to stay by your side, but this matter is a race against time.”

“Eduard, I...”

“It’s fine. Unless something drastic happens, I should be back early tomorrow morning.”

And with those words, Eduard was off to the transfer gate and on his way to Lindis. Erika made for the guest room to check up on Claus and Anne. Paying no heed to the long dress getting tangled in her legs, she ran earnestly through the darkened corridors of the palace.

The events of the day crossed her mind one after the other.

Anne blushing among the bright, blooming flowers.

Claus’ glimmering eyes as he investigated the star crystal necklace.

A faint yet suspicious blue light emanating from the necklace, which turned out to be enchanted with the magic of a vampyre.

Erika needed to see Anne’s smile and Claus’ frown right this second, or she would never be at ease.



The room provided for Duke Hafan’s children had been decorated with an ample amount of flowers from the gardens, and their sweet scent permeated the air. By the time Erika reached the room, however, Claus and Anne were nowhere to be found.

The maids in service to Duke Hafan had all fallen into a magical slumber. Erika made doubly sure Anne wasn’t mixed in among the sleeping maids, but she was definitely gone.

This has to be Claus’ doing.

All the maids here were from House Hafan, which meant they all had a decent knowledge of magic and had learned how to resist it.

Surely the only one who could cast a sleep spell powerful enough to incapacitate all of them was Claus, considering his extraordinary talent.

But how long ago did he do it?

Erika took another look around. It bothered her that Claus wasn’t alone—that Anne had disappeared as well. She was almost entirely sure Claus was headed

to the Seafarer's Ruins. If luck was on her side, perhaps Anne had gone to her parents instead.

I should hurry and report this to my father and Duke Hafan, shouldn't I?

It would be terrible if she allowed the situation to become gossip and cause panic in the palace. Erika closed the door behind her and walked down the corridor toward her father's room.

After fifteen minutes of walking, Erika should've long since reached her father's room, and yet, here she found herself at the same door as before. By this point, Erika had realized she was completely lost in the palace she was oh-so-familiar with.

A spell had been cast to turn the place into a labyrinth.

However, even Claus shouldn't have been skilled enough to distort space.

This must be a phantasmal maze, she surmised.

This spell messed with the sense of direction of whomever passed through, trapping them in an illusion and forcing them to wander about as if they were in an endless labyrinth.

Thanks to the magic, it seemed the Spring Palace had been divided into districts. Erika couldn't reach the adults' rooms, and the adults likely couldn't reach the children's rooms either. Erika could hardly conceal her surprise at Claus being able to use such complex magic at the age of ten.

You're way too scrupulous, kid! Talk about a waste of talent!

The missing kids were already an emergency, and now she had this maze to deal with. Still, knowing that this sort of situation required that she keep a cool head, Erika sucked in a deep breath.

"My apologies, Eduard, it looks like I'll be putting this to use right away."

Erika's eyes shot to the key she had received from him. She braced herself, inserted the key into the nearest keyhole, and turned. The key itself was simply a tool to connect any door in the Spring Palace to her brother's repository.

The next moment, the door swung open to reveal the Wunderkammer of Alchemist Eduard Aurelia.

This was the first time Erika had ever set foot in her brother's Wunderkammer. This was both the workshop of an alchemist and a showcase of magical artifacts gathered from all over the world.

In the center was a large table, presumably a workbench. It was splattered here and there with burn marks and distinct chemical stains. The surface was covered with various pieces of experimental and processing apparatuses. Glass test tubes, stills, burners, oil lamps, and more were meticulously arranged in an orderly fashion.

A cabinet to her right was stuffed with the body parts of various beasts. Out of all of them, the ones that stood out the most were the unicorn horn he'd procured from Hafan and the basilisk fossil he'd ordered from the southern continent. A majority were fossils, but there were also a considerable number of specimens suspended in alcohol.

To her left, another cabinet was packed tight with Aurelian ores. These weren't just any ordinary ores; he had gathered special minerals with innate magical properties. Every item was carefully stored in a dedicated box or jar, each with a label indicating its properties and where it was found. Eduard's penchant for organization was clearly on display.

These materials were, of course, used to create spells. The wands in which such magic had been stored ahead of time could all be found in a cabinet at the front of the room. It was piled top to bottom with countless small boxes, each containing its own wand.

Every small box was labeled with the details of the magic stored within and the materials used to make it. Two wands containing the same spell could differ in their output and effects depending on their components. Perhaps Eduard had been studying their differences, researching day and night which combination would draw out the most power.

Erika did her best to look through the myriad of wands, but there weren't any that would dispel Claus' maze. Having confirmed this, she decided on her next objective. It would be too difficult to seek help from her father and the other adults.

At the very least, I have to go after Claus and Anne myself.

She investigated the wardrobe in the corner. As was to be expected, it was also organized and labeled with care. It contained the clothes Eduard had used as a child. They were all imbued with defensive magic and hoarded by the man who had a bad habit of keeping anything and everything close at hand.

Using the labels, she searched out the box from when her brother was eight years old and threw it open. She practically turned it inside out as she yanked out an outfit.

Erika stripped off her dress and immediately donned the clothing. She tied her hair back with a ribbon, stuffed a crystal-powered, silver pocket watch into the breast pocket of her outer coat, and shoved her hands into leather alchemists' gloves.

She changed into black leather boots and draped the largest leather bag she could find over her shoulder. They had both been waterproofed with oil. After that, she tossed two star crystal lanterns into the bag; they were guaranteed not to rust.

The most important part was to select which wands she would bring with her.

First, she chose a Glámr-Sight wand. This one was the same as the one Eduard had used. Its effect would last around thirty seconds.

Next, she picked out a Paralyze wand. It was made of amber, its end containing a Cockatrice fossil coated in plant resin. The handle was silver, engraved with a cross between a rooster and a snake. The wick was a dried Basilisk tail, and it had an effective time of three seconds.

She searched out whichever other wands might be useful, stuffing two to three of each into her leather sack.

Gust wand. Urðr-Sight wand. Levitate wand. Castling wand. Feather Fall wand. Lock wand. Grease wand. Mage Hand wand. Water-Walk wand.

As she was choosing wands, she spotted one that was sealed and tightly locked away: the Sailor's Song wand.

This wand was special. If the wand were to be waved to a certain melody, it

was said that the Alchemist's Star would fall from the sky. In reality, the spell imbued in this wand could generate a meteor in the distant sky and send it plummeting to the ground. It was thanks to this magic that the Seafaring Tribe was also called the Aurelia of the Stars. Powerful as it was, this wand's recoil was incomparable to all others. Should a mediocre alchemist go above his standing and attempt to use it, he would lose his life by bringing but a single stone down from the heavens.

Even if it weren't sealed, it's way too dangerous to use.

With that in mind, she returned the box containing the Sailor's Song wand to its shelf. This wand was probably a memento of their dilettante mother. She could see no other reason why Eduard would have it here.

Erika then grabbed one animated rope. This rope, which had been processed in the same way as the wands, could be freely manipulated a set number of times.

She deftly packed away one bottle of obscuring mist, then one bottle of moon-gallnut ink, which was made from a special mineral found in Hafan. Any letters written with this ink would emit moonlight only so long as the moon was out. She couldn't find any normal ink, so she settled for this one.

Finally, she gathered up the rest of her supplies: a fragment of chalk, a pen and as many scraps of parchment paper as she could squeeze in her bag, a bottle of distilled alcohol, a small box of chocolate just in case, and a single athame.

With her tools in order, Erika stepped out of the workshop, closing and locking the door behind her.

Let's start by using Glámr-Sight.

When she waved the relevant wand, a pale-green magic circle manifested and then closed in around her eyes. The moment Glámr-Sight went into effect, the detailed information of the illusionary maze appeared right before her.

Creator unknown, practitioner Claus Hafan, and the magic had been activated around thirty minutes prior—right around the time Erika was seeing off Eduard.

She must have just missed him. Looking into the amount of mana Claus had

used, she could tell that the spell would remain active for around three to four hours from when it had been cast.

It's just as I feared.

Would it be too late if she just waited for it to run out and went to the Dukes for help?

Normally, when a magician chanted a spell, both the creator and practitioner would be the same individual. This time, the fact that they were different meant he had chanted from a spell scroll. Conversely, if the spell were cast from a wand, it would be possible to tell the creator but not the practitioner.

The magic was being maintained by both Claus' mana and his spell cards. Several small cards had been set in all sorts of places throughout the palace.

Both spell scrolls and spell cards were common tools in Hafan. They served as blueprints and amplifiers for spells, respectively. The cards, laid out like a barrier, boosted the end result, which allowed for the sheer size of the maze.

Erika next determined she would have to investigate the transfer gate in the cellar. She burst into a sprint, only to recall what had happened when Edward headed off to Lindis.

Huh? Don't you need a one-way key to use it?

It was only now that Erika began to question it. How did Anne go to the Seafarer's Ruins in the original storyline? If she didn't have a key, how was she able to use the gate?

6

Erika hurried down the palace stairs in the dark.

Yep, changing was the right answer. I feel so much lighter compared to running in a dress. Now that her memories from her past life were back, Erika found dresses a little suffocating. *Maybe I'm just lacking in femininity,* she chuckled to herself.

A while later, she was at the gate.

“They’re not here anymore.”

She’d had a faint hope that they might’ve given up in front of the transfer gate, but evidently, things would not be that easy.

The area was lined with rows upon rows of stone arches. These were the gates connecting to vital locations all around the country. Each gate was given a design to signify where it connected to.

A faintly glowing insignia was suspended in the center of each arch, slowly spinning in place. These were the seals, and they wouldn’t open without a one-way key.

Without hesitation, Erika made way for the gate farthest in the back. This one was the oldest, the gate to the Seafarer’s Ruins. Upon reaching it, she was in for yet another surprise.

“It’s... still locked.”

Not only was the seal still present, it even had a physical locking mechanism. Even if someone somehow managed to deceive the key system, it would be impossible to use the gate.

How anticlimactic.

But this surprise was a welcome one. Erika breathed a sigh of relief. There was no need to raid Eduard’s workshop to prepare for war.

I’d much rather be let down than horrified.

Just as she was on the verge of feeling completely at ease, a single question niggled at the back of her mind: then where did Claus go?

Just in case, she used Glámr-Sight to investigate the area... and immediately noticed the disaster.

Wait. This lock’s just an illusion!

Erika’s eyes went wide. Someone—or something—had destroyed the real lock. What’s more, the seal was also just an illusion.

The practitioner who’d made it so the lock appeared intact was Claus Hafan. The spell had been created and activated thirty minutes prior.

As for the illusion of the seal, it had been cast ten years ago by Duke Aurelia. The gate to the Seafarer's Ruins was far older than any of the others. As one-way keys were a newer form of magic, Erika surmised he had been unable to install it on the antiquated facility.

Instead, he'd locked it by physical means and used an illusion to make it seem as though it had been sealed magically as well. It was valid camouflage in Aurelia, where simply casting Glámr-Sight would cost a small fortune. But against Claus, a magician skilled in concealment and illusion, it was completely meaningless. Claus had seen it and immediately noticed the seal was a fake.

After he had destroyed the lock, Claus took inspiration from Duke Aurelia. He hid his handiwork with yet another illusion. As a result, both physically and magically, the stoppers were all merely for show.

"Looks like I really do have to march in there and drag him out."

Erika was genuinely terrified. Past life included, she had never been good with ghosts or scary stories. She dreaded going to the ruins where she knew such monsters actually existed.

Still...

She stared at the gate to the Seafarer's Ruins.

"Just you wait."

If the Hafan siblings were in such a place, she couldn't just forget all about it. If they'd gone in without knowing who or what lurked in those ruins, she had to save them.

Erika took a step forward and entered the gate. The words to activate the warp magic were always a poem in praise of the destination. The poem was simply titled, "To Tír na nÓg." She closed her eyes and read it out loud, as its words had been carved deep into the gate.

"My dear friend, won't you come with me? Far, far beyond the distant sea?

For when we step upon new sand, a new name for our promised land."



Erika opened her eyes after a pang of dizziness. She was currently at the ruins'

ground level.

As was common practice in olden days, this transfer gate's spell had simply been carved into the bare floor where she stood.

In contrast to the sturdy white stone that made up the Spring Palace, the ruins had been thrown together from piles of regular rock. It lay near the coast in the westernmost reaches of Aurelian territory.

Erika could smell the faint scent of salt.

It was quite late at night, but the area wasn't in complete darkness. There were lamps of processed star crystal embedded in the walls, faintly illuminating the space with a weak, gentle, yellow-tinted light.

The clan who had developed Aurelia had come here, once upon a time. They were the last group of people to settle on the continent. Those who lived here before them called them the Seafaring Tribe. They were skilled sailors and adept alchemists. They were the men and women of a ruined country who had lost a land to call home.

Perhaps their fatherland had fallen to the extremes of alchemy. Some legends seemed to suggest this, but the details were unclear. Where had they come from? What was their origin? The answers to these questions had all been swallowed by the darkness of history.

There must have been some kernel of truth to the legend, as the people of Aurelia had expunged a number of techniques they once used, deeming them forbidden. This included the art of creating homunculi—artificial humans—which was only passed down in folklore. Now, only techniques to reproduce certain body parts remained.

It was thought that ancient alchemical arts still remained in the ruins, long forgotten.

Just to be sure, Erika used the Glámr-Sight wand to look around. At present, there weren't any traces of magic apart from the transfer gate. She could breathe easy for now.

I'd be banging my head against the wall if he cast his illusions on the ruins as well.

Erika then went on to use her Urðr-Sight wand. This wand allowed her to witness past events, and she waved it five times to rewind a sufficient amount. The circle formed from its five points of white light enveloped the room whole before coming back like a reflected ripple to gather in her eyes.

Through her newly gained hindsight, she could see Claus' back as he exited through the passage to her left.

"Claus came here alone."

Erika continued to watch. A little while later, Anne used the gate to reach this room. She must have noticed something, as she inspected a specific point before going left as well.

With that, the magic concluded. Now Erika had a general grasp of the situation. After Claus came to the ruins alone, Anne noticed he was gone and chased after him. If only Claus had come here, Erika would've still felt a little optimistic, but now the situation looked grave.

Erika searched where Anne seemed to have found something and spotted a spell card. Its magic hadn't been activated yet.

The card hasn't had any mana put into it; that's why Glámr-Sight can't detect it, Erika thought as she picked it up. The card was made of parchment and seemed to be scrawled over with ancient letters of Hafan.

Erika was not the most proficient with languages, and she gave up on translating. Perhaps she would have gotten many more hints if she could read, but as she was now, she still had plenty of leads to follow. She could follow the unused spell cards Claus had left behind like the breadcrumbs of Hansel and Gretel.

After passing through the left corridor, Erika could see down a series of rooms made of the same depressing stone, topped off by a narrow corridor at the very end. There were a number of lamps stationed all over the place, so there was never any complete darkness.

Still, this place is ridiculously scary!

The Seafarer's Ruins descended downward, almost like an underground dungeon. Erika could feel ceaseless chills running down her spine.

“Just tell yourself ghosts aren’t scary! And they’re not, they’re not... They’re definitely not!”

Erika spoke up in order to brush away her fear. She wrung out an insignificant drop of courage, using the Glámr-Sight and Urðr-Sight wands one after the other to follow the past specters of Claus and Anne.

Once she got around 200 meters from the entrance and climbed down her fourth staircase, her sense of direction was growing hazy. As she ran down the dark path, she was suddenly reminded of her past life.

She remembered the incident in high school, during which she was hit from behind in the darkness of the night. This wasn’t the sort of fear that caused her to freeze up; it was a gloomier emotion that clung to her with an unpleasant viscousness.

No, humans are a lot scarier. When I think about it that way, ghosts sound a little easier to handle.

The grudges, envy, and hatred of *living* humans—surely these were what she truly needed to fear. At the tail end of her flashback, she ran into someone. A living, breathing human being.

“Is that... Is that you, Erika?!”

There stood a haggard-looking Claus Hafan.

Chapter 2: The Seafarer's Ruins

1

"Claus! Are you alright?!"

Erika found herself sprinting toward him. She was overcome with heartfelt relief the moment she saw his face rather than his turned back.

Claus must have been relieved to see her as well; the sternness gradually vanished from his eyes.

"Yeah, I'm perfectly fine. I'm more surprised you managed to come here alone... That aside, what are you wearing?"

His rude remark drove Erika to take another good look at her outfit. The clothes Eduard had worn at age eight fit the image of a young nobleman perfectly, but crossdressing wasn't in the playbook of your average noblewoman.

"I borrowed Eduard's clothing. As you can imagine, it would be quite hard to crawl around these old ruins in a dress."

I was looking for something practical, and I was in a hurry, she added internally.

"Oh, so that's how it is. It suits you better than that other stuff you were wearing."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

So men's clothes fit me better than glamorous dresses?

Erika smiled bitterly. She'd thought her facial features were delicate enough, so was it the way she carried herself that lacked womanliness?

No, it's a good thing to be able to pull off practical clothes, so let's feel good about it.

Once she had convinced herself, she switched gears.



“I’m glad I found you so quickly. This is the most dangerous place in Aurelia, you know?”

“Yeah, I’m starting to see why. I never thought I’d use up so much mana after just a little bit of exploration,” Claus said, looking genuinely concerned.

Erika tilted her head. All the darkness and dreariness threatened to unnerve her, but were there really areas here that required a ton of magic to traverse?

“Err, Claus, what do you mean by that?”

“You’re telling me you got all the way here without noticing?”

“I haven’t noticed a thing.”

“You’re pretty slow.”

“Aurelians and Hafans are different. What am I supposed to do about it?”

Being slow and meticulous was a virtue in Aurelia.

Oh, and I’m sure my lack of talent and effort has something to do with it, Erika thought bitterly.

“There’s a mana-draining spell at work in these ruins. For a while now, even activating low-level magic has been placing a terrible burden on me.”

“Can we tell where the effect is coming from? We might find something if you use Glámr-Sight.”

“I’ve already identified what I presume to be the source, but I couldn’t dispel it. No idea why.”

“I bet there’s a metal or gem that naturally obstructs magic embedded in it. In other words, there’s no spell to break.”

Erika had heard of such metals before. For instance, in Lucanlandt, there existed a metal with powerful magic-dispelling properties. It wouldn’t be strange if there was some other metal out there that could absorb or obstruct it. Perhaps some combination of materials could produce the same effect.

“If that wasn’t bad enough, wide-range magic is intercepted too. Anything beyond a certain area of effect just misfires.”

“Come to think of it, my brother said there were traps here that’d already been tripped, but he couldn’t tell what they did.”

“I see.”

A minor inconvenience to Aurelian alchemists but considerably ill-suited to a Hafan magician.

The Seafarer’s Ruins were practically a gallery of the lost technology of Aurelia. Perhaps these lost arts, rather than actually being “lost,” had simply been removed from the knowledge pool—thrown away, so to speak—for being too problematic. For example, the prior occupants of this continent, whose society the Seafaring Tribe had sought to merge into, likely wouldn’t have taken too kindly to this mana-obstructing trap.

“Because of that... Well, have a look at this.”

Claus spread out a large sheet of parchment. The page had a thick, rectangular border which listed out the names of the gods of the twelve winds in decorative script. This template usually meant that the document was a map.

However, apart from the border and some lines of Hafan magic words, it was pretty much blank. There was nothing remotely map-like about it.

“I thought I would try automapping, so I placed spell cards along my route. But thanks to that troublesome trap, chanting the spell does nothing for me.”

“Oh, so that’s what the cards were for.”

“Had I known sooner that my map was going to be nullified, I wouldn’t have gone in so deep.”

He cursed, sighed, and began trudging onward. As it seemed Claus was done talking for the time being, Erika promptly brought up what was bothering her.

“So, umm, Claus... Would you happen to know where Anne is?”

“Wha...?! Why are you bringing up Anne?” he blurted, flinching.

That reaction makes him seem like a little animal.

“I used Urðr-Sight to chase after you, and when I did, I saw not only you but Anne as well.”

“I didn’t bring my little sister with me. I’m not stupid.”

“It seemed like she was pursuing you.”

“I’m sure I put her to sleep. Oh no, don’t tell me she anticipated that I would slip out and heightened her magical resistance?”

Evidently, he had taken his own precautions to make sure his sister didn’t tag along to such a dangerous place.

So, you’re not that bad of a brother after all. However, Anne had one-upped him this time. Just like Claus, Anne was also a young and talented magician. As a result of her own insight and efforts, she had managed to resist her brother’s magic.

Claus’ secrecy backfired on him. The more someone tells you not to do something, the more secrets are kept hush-hush... the more it plagues your mind. Looks like these siblings share their burning sense of curiosity.

“I didn’t see Anne on the way here. She must have gone down a different path.”

Thinking she’d find Anne with him, Erika had given her undivided attention to tailing Claus and neglected to check for his sister. She was also trying to preserve the limited uses of the expensive Urðr-Sight wand.

I should have used it more often, she scolded herself.

“Shall we turn back, Claus? We can look for Anne along the way.”

“Yes, you’re right. It’s clear I wasn’t prepared enough to explore these ruins,” Claus sighed, eyeing Erika’s equipment. His gaze flitted across her alchemist’s leather gloves, her bag stuffed to the brim with wands, and her thick-soled boots.

“Unless I come back as readily equipped as you, I feel like I’ll lose my way quite quickly.”

Erika was a little relieved to hear him accept it so easily. She really had no recourse if he became defiant and insisted he wasn’t going to turn back.

“Now that that’s settled, let’s get right to searching for Anne,” she said.

“Sure.”

“If we can’t find her, we should return to the Spring Palace.”

“Right, this maze is a bit much for children to tackle. We’ll need some help.”

“Speaking of mazes, please do make sure you dispel that phantasmal maze in the palace,” Erika said, though it was also to remind herself. By this point, it wouldn’t be strange if a number of the maids had found themselves stranded.

“Hm? You noticed?”

“If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have come out dressed like this.”

“I thought you were eager to join me. Is that not it?”

“Definitely not!”

Erika made sure to drive the point home. She wouldn’t want anyone to misunderstand; it wasn’t that she had been in on Claus’ little expedition. Unless she strongly insisted she’d come here to stop him, she would likely be treated as an accomplice.

“We’ll backtrack and use Urðr-Sight at every fork. That should tell us where Anne got lost.”

“An Urðr-Sight wand? May I use it, too? I was keeping Glámr-Sight up the whole time until I ran into you, so it’s going to take a while to restore my mana.”

“I don’t see why not. It’ll be more efficient to have two sets of eyes looking for her.”

Eastern magic shaved away not only one’s mental stamina but their physical strength as well. Even if Claus *was* a genius, he was still ten years old. In the Seafarer’s Ruins, where his mana expenditure was apparently intense, keeping Glámr-Sight active for so long was an impressive feat.

However, the idea of two people using the wand led Erika to wonder how much magic it had left. She had already used it around sixty times before she found Claus.

The Urðr-Sight wand was made of ash wood. Its tip was yellow tourmaline,

and the handle was gold etched to mimic woven fabric.

Its most prominent feature was its wick: a magnificent, ten-meter-long silk tapestry patterned with gold and silver thread. It had been compressed with spatial magic until it was mere millimeters across, only to undergo further processes to make it light enough to wield. This piece had taken considerable time and money to produce.

When a wand's magic was recharged, the wick would have to be replaced. In other words, this magic was extraordinarily expensive.

I'm so sorry, Eduard! Erika apologized silently to her brother as she opened up the box containing a second Urðr-Sight wand.

Just how many wands would she go through in one night? And how much would they all cost? The thought was beginning to terrify her.

2

Erika handed Claus the partially used Urðr-Sight wand along with an alchemist's glove that would lessen its recoil. She broke the seal on the brand-new wand and held it aloft.

"So this is an Aurelian wand... How do you use it?" Claus asked.

"Just swing it with a clear idea in mind."

"That's surprisingly simple. May I test it out?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Claus cautiously waved the wand. The Urðr-Sight magic activated without a hitch, concentrating itself in a white magic circle over his eyes. Claus blinked a few times in wonder.

"This is convenient. Not only am I not using any of my own mana, I can already see you from a few minutes ago."

"You won't be able to see events too far back. If you keep a specific target in mind when you activate it, it should automatically focus on them."

"So I just have to think of Anne when I use it?"

“That’s right. Now let’s get going.”

Perhaps due to the oxidation of the room’s star crystal lamps, the light in this chamber was somewhat weak. Erika fished through her bag and took out her own lantern to make sure she didn’t let any important clues slip by.

“Claus, please carry this with you.”

“Got it.” Claus tied the lantern to the end of his staff.

Swinging their wands now and again, the two of them pressed onward, diligently lighting the way back with the two lamps.

“I’m seeing you muttering to yourself a lot.”

“Please don’t tease me.”

“Are you afraid of ghosts or something?”

“Claus, please concentrate on finding Anne.”

Erika lightly reproached Claus for his wholly unnecessary take on the matter. She didn’t want to be teased for her childishness when they had such important matters to attend to. It was all the more embarrassing when she took her actual age into account.

“You look awfully fretful, and your eyes are dark. Can’t you look a bit more like a proper eight-year-old?”

“How about you search a little more seriously?!”

“I mean, now and then, you have a look in your eyes like you’ve given up on life.”

Erika glared back at Claus’ cold, inhumane eyes.

For crying out loud, that’s the one thing I don’t want to hear from the likes of you. I mean, at the start of the game, your portrait art practically shows you with the eyes of a dead fish.

Erika desperately held her tongue, however. These words would just be incomprehensible to Claus, especially as he was now.

Oh, but he did have a sadistic side to him. Given that he was toying with her immediately after discovering her weakness, Claus was already showing

foreboding signs. Not that it mattered; for now, they had to concentrate on finding Anne. Erika endeavored to ignore him and returned her undivided attention to the search.

“Have you spotted her yet?”

“No, I haven’t seen head nor tail of her. The Urðr-Sight keeps focusing on you.”

“Are you properly thinking about your sister when you use it?”

“Yeah, I’m doing it, I’m doing it. It’s really irritating that I have to keep watching you.”

This little brat! No, no, no, he’s not wasting any more of my time.

Claus’ thoughtless statement set her shoulders aquiver, but she managed to keep her cool.

“Is Anne really in here? I haven’t found a single trace of her.”

Err, wait, something’s not right here.

“Umm, Claus, do you remember where you put those automapping spell cards of yours?”

“My cards? Of course I remember. In this room, they’re...”

Claus ran over to the corner and began feeling around the wall. He seemed to be having some trouble. After holding up his lantern and walking the length of the room a few times, he returned with a baffled look on his face.

“They’re gone.”

“Are you sure?”

“What could this mean? I definitely put one here... That’s strange. It’s almost as if...”

Claus probably wasn’t mistaken. Erika didn’t have a particularly vivid memory, but she did recall seeing his unused spell cards when she was searching for him. Now they were gone.

Why do my worst hunches always seem to come true?

Erika looked around before addressing him.

“It looks like the rooms and the corridors of the Seafarer’s Ruins move around, and it’s not by magical means. They’re moving mechanically.”

At that moment, an ominous clink resounded through the labyrinth. It was a faraway sound from a distant room.

“A mechanical labyrinth?!”

“Father’s told me about similar anti-theft measures the people of Aurelia used long ago, but I never imagined there would be one this large.”

With the absurdly loud sound of grating gears, the ground at their feet began to shake and sway. This was no earthquake; at this moment, the room they were in was *moving*.

“You said you saw both me and Anne in the room with the gate, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Was that first room the last time you saw Anne?”

“Yes.”

“That means the pathways were probably the same when I first came and when you chased after me... but when Anne passed through, the passage led somewhere else.”

“That sounds about right.”

“And now that the maze has shifted again, we’ve lost our current location. Is that right, Erika?”

“Indeed. At this point, there’s no guarantee we can make it back to the warp gate.”

They had now lost both their sole lead on Anne and their means of returning to the Spring Palace. The hunter had become the hunted; while they were searching for a lost child, they hadn’t noticed they’d become lost ages ago. It was far too late now.

“You’re pretty calm about all this,” Claus noted.

“You think so? I’d panic if panicking would do something for me,” Erika

replied.

Erika's biggest worry right now was Anne. Unlike the two of them, Anne was wandering these dim ruins alone. As Erika imagined the small seven-year-old girl anxiously pacing these halls, she felt a tight grip on her heart. Moreover, what would happen if Anne was possessed by the ancient spirit?

Erika quickly pulled the brakes on that pessimistic train of thought. Right now, finding Anne and getting back to the palace were the only two things she had to consider.

Unfortunately, she already felt like the search had reached a dead end, and she was on the verge of giving up.

If I wait for morning to come, won't my father and Duke Hafan notice and send a search party? She paused and thought about it for a moment. *No, by that time, Anne will have died, just like in Liber Monstrorum.*

Their relationship was different this time around; it was hard to say whether or not Anne would come to kill her in six years. But even if Erika had managed to destroy her own death flag, she didn't feel comfortable leaving Anne to her fate. She had grown somewhat attached to the girl and didn't want her life to end in such a miserable way.

"Things are just going to get worse if we keep moving around without a plan," said Claus.

"There must be something we can do. Let's put our heads together." Erika set down her bag and opened it wide.

What could she do with what she had on hand? She once again checked through her inventory.

"You really brought a lot of stuff."

"There's no telling what might happen. You know what they say—you can never be too prepared."

Was there any magic that could get them out of this situation? Erika flipped over box after box, checking each label.

"A Grease wand? That's the magic that makes things slide. Cast it on your

opponent's hands, and they won't be able to grab anything; cast it on their feet, and they're liable to trip. But what use is that in a maze? It's so situational..."

"I was in a hurry, okay?! Not everything has to have an apparent purpose right away!"

Claus curiously peered in and joined her in sorting through the jam-packed bag.

"I can't find any wands that will solve this in a flash. This is pretty hard. If only wide-range search magic worked in here..."

"You'll have to curse my cautious ancestors for that one."

While Claus was also carefully reading each label, it seemed he didn't have any brilliant ideas. Still, it was too soon to give up. She persisted in her search until she noticed a faint light—different than that of a star crystal—pouring from its depths.

"That's... the moon-gallnut ink."

"We use it in Hafan quite a bit."

There was a material called moonbeam ore that could only be found in Hafan. It glowed with a faint light come moonrise, only to lose its glimmer at moonset. When clouds were cast over the moon, the moonbeam ore would likewise be obscured. It was quite a peculiar stone.

Since ancient times, Hafan magicians had used its special properties to create ink that would glow in sync with the moon.

"If the moon is up... I'd say it's just past eight o'clock."

The small vial rippled with yellow light kissed by a hint of blue. It was considerably faint compared to the star crystal lanterns; the night sky outside was probably quite cloudy.

"Claus, that's..."

When she covered her lantern to stare at the fleeting light of the moon-gallnut ink, Erika noticed something else shimmering in one corner of the room. What's more, it waxed and waned at the same time as the ink.

“Ah, you noticed it too?”

“Yes, it’s glowing just like the ink.”

The fluctuation of the light presumably corresponded with a stream of thin clouds flowing in front of the moon—and it was thanks to this that they were able to notice at all.

Erika shut her lantern away in her bag, and Claus covered the end of his staff with his sleeve. Now that these stronger light sources had been cut off, the faint light of the writing on the walls grew stronger.

A crescent moon was drawn on the wall, and below it was some familiar handwriting.

This was a message left by their predecessors, the previous explorers of this dungeon. Yes, the golden light of the moon truly was the silver lining on the dark cloud hanging over them.

3

“It says... ‘Through the crescent-moon gate, search for the twin half-moons.’”

“This is my brother’s... Eduard’s handwriting.”

“That guy?!”

Erika was deeply relieved to find some trace of her brother in the Seafarer’s Ruins. It was as if she had stumbled upon Buddha in the depths of hell. She pictured Eduard with an archaic smile on his face, waving for her to follow.

“He might have left this hint for himself while he was exploring,” she thought aloud.

“Then we might as well follow it.”

“Right.”

The two children returned the boxed wands and other tools they had spread across the floor to the bag and sprung up. In accordance with the message, they found a doorway with a crescent moon seal drawn over its arch, and they quickly passed through it.

After walking down a dim corridor maybe thirty meters long, they came across another inscription written in moon-gallnut ink. This one had half-moon shapes side by side; these were undoubtedly the twin half-moons.

“There it is!” Claus exclaimed.

“There’s some more writing.”

“‘The path will open when the full moon rises to the center.’ ...?”

“Full moon? I don’t see a circle anywhere. Do you?”

“Wait. The message says it will rise to the center, which means...”

Once again, they heard the grating of gears and a heavy, metallic clank—the sound of nearby rooms shifting around.

“I believe this hint was written in anticipation of the shifting of the labyrinth,” said Claus.

“So that sound means one of the rooms around us has become the ‘full moon’... the room where the next hint is.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m thinking. And at the center... Normally, when the moon is at its zenith, it points south.”

“Oh, shoot. How could I have forgotten something as basic as a compass?”

“Just leave it to me. I can’t use powerful or wide-range magic, but I can still perform a simple cantrip.”

Claus held a wand perpendicular to the floor and began to chant. He was still using the ancient language of Hafan, but unlike before, his words carried the gentle tone and cadence of a nursery rhyme.

When he let go, the enchanted wand spun somewhat unnaturally before uneventfully falling flat in the direction they had just come from.

“That’s south.”

“That was a bit anticlimactic.”

“It’s just a simple old charm, but it’s surprisingly convenient.”

The two of them headed back down the path they had come from. Eduard’s

hint implied that it wasn't only the passage of time that caused the maze to change shape. The layout had shifted the moment they'd reached the twin moons, meaning there were likely weight sensors at play as well.

If they had started off by splitting up to search the ruins, perhaps Erika and Claus would never have reunited. This thought caused Erika to grab Claus' hand as they headed south through the dim corridor. Now and then, they would put their lanterns away to check for markings, proceeding with the utmost caution.

After walking for a while, they spotted a faint, circular light through the darkness.

"A circle... That must be the full moon!" shouted Erika.

"And no message as far as I can see."

"Do you think this is the destination, then?"

"What was your brother trying to accomplish by leading us here?"

The passage marked with the full moon was furnished with a brand-new wooden door. Thankfully, it wasn't locked. Bracing themselves for anything hostile that might be lurking behind it, Erika and Claus slowly pushed the door open.

"Now, this is..."

"Huh. It's full of trunks."

Inside the room were around five largish wooden trunks, the kind one might pack with clothing for a long voyage. They were sturdy, reinforced with metal frames, and fitted with built-in locks. Stashed away in ruins like these, they almost looked like treasure chests.

The trunks were carved with the sea and the star, the heraldic symbols of House Aurelia. While the attached labels were in Eduard's handwriting, they seemed to be coded.

If Erika had to take a guess, the trunks contained supplies Eduard had set aside for exploring the maze. There were two blankets and traces of a fire beside them.

"It looks like he set up a simple camp here."

“He must like to stay on top of things. I’d expect no less from your brother.”

“There might be something we can use.”

“I should hope so.”

Despite their best efforts to open the trunks, they were all locked tight.

It really is like Eduard to be so thoroughly prepared, Erika noted, somewhat impressed.

“I’m sorry, Claus. Unfortunately, I didn’t bring a skeleton key with me...”

“Don’t worry. I’ve recovered enough mana for an unlocking spell.”

“Then, if you would.”

“Yeah, just leave it to me.”

Claus placed his staff over a trunk and chanted a spell. Unlike wands, the staves of Eastern magicians were magic amplification devices. Claus needed to cast even the most elementary of spells through his staff if he wanted to triumph over the ruins’ magic obstruction.

Erika watched him anxiously as the burden of low mana was placed on him yet again.

Once Claus had finished his chant, a faint, light-pink magic circle enveloped the trunk. The circle slowly rotated, gradually shrinking until it was concentrated on the lock mechanism. This was followed by a stiff, solid click.

“Alright, looks like it worked.”

“Let’s open it.”

“Way ahead of you.”

Claus threw open the heavy lid of the trunk while Erika held up her lantern to make out the numerous items within it.

“A few magic scrolls, some preserved food, bottled water... Oh, this one’s a lifesaver.”

“Did you find something nice?”

“Take a look. Mana-replenishing potions.”

The box contained a number of sky-blue-tinted glass vials, lined up in an orderly fashion.

Once again, Erika had to thank her brother from the depths of her heart. Now Claus would be able to put a stopper on his rapidly deteriorating condition.

“With this many, we won’t have to keep relying on your wands. We can have a bit more flexibility, too.”

“That really is a lifesaver.”

All of a sudden, Erika was struck by a realization: if an alchemist was never at risk of running out of mana, why were these here? Why had her brother stored so many mana potions? Were they for the friend who’d come with him? Was Eduard’s friend not an alchemist?

Erika snapped back to her senses. Checking the supply was her current priority.

After downing a vial, Claus immediately began unlocking trunk after trunk. He seemed to be on cloud nine now that his mana was topped off, like a fish back in the water. By the time Erika noticed, he was already lifting the lid on the fourth trunk, and she hurriedly reached out for the last unopened one.

“Leave this one to me.”

Just as she swung open the last box, a sinister, purple circle spread out around her. An ominous twang sounded out as the weak protective magic sewn into the sleeve of her clothes with magic thread was blown away.



Oof! This is clearly some sort of curse.

She hurried to dodge it, but the circle shattered far faster than she could react, its many fragments coiling around her like a chain.

“Huh?!”

“Crap! It’s a trap!”

I knew it!

Despite her panic, she was cognizant enough to understand the situation. If Eduard was going to leave all his supplies in the ruins, *of course* he was going to put up some anti-theft measures. It was entirely possible that some outlaw would illegally enter the Seafarer’s Ruins for a good bit of graverobbing.

Claus immediately activated his Glámr-Sight and stared fixedly at Erika. He seemed to be checking the details of the curse placed upon her. It wasn’t long before his eyes swayed in torment, the complexion visibly draining from his face. Once he was finished analyzing her, he looked miserably at the ground.

What’s with him? He’s acting like a doctor who has to tell a patient they have an incurable disease.

His attitude terrified Erika. Try as she may, she could only imagine the worst possible scenario.

“I’m sorry, Erika. This is a curse of death.”

How wonderful, she quipped through her abject resignation.

The people of Aurelia were known to be obsessive artisans who took great pride in their work. Most alchemists were extremely harsh on thieves.

“It was cast by my brother, right?”

“Yeah, the creator is listed as the one and only Eduard Aurelia. It was set about a month ago.”

Claus’ expression was dark, and each time his eyes met Erika’s, he would bitterly furrow his brow.

Wait, hold up, am I going to die? Right here, right now?! She could feel her heart loudly drumming like an alarm bell.

“It’s the Curse of Merciful Death... This magic brings about a swift, painless death after a set period of time.”

“How long are we talking?”

“Generously, twelve hours. Worst-case scenario, eight.”

“Really?!”

This was far more time than Erika had anticipated, and she had to pat her chest in relief.

“The delay is probably in place to inflict as much psychological suffering upon the victim as possible. We will need some very specific catalysts if we want to dispel it. Perhaps the intent was to give even a burglar a chance of salvation if he begged the caster for forgiveness.”

Erika once again admired Eduard’s thoroughness. He *did* have the darkest smile of the game’s seven love interests, after all. No doubt, her brother had prepared quite a savage retribution.

I only see his kind and soft side, so this is rather refreshing. It really is a shame that I never got to play Eduard’s route.

Her mind was preoccupied with such thoughts in her desperate bid to escape from reality.

“Erika, are you feeling alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

But upon seeing Claus’ worried face, she forced herself back to the real world.

“Erika, let’s return to the palace. We can still make it in time. Your father probably has the necessary catalysts and scrolls to dispel this sort of curse, and I’m sure my father can—”

“No, Anne comes first.”

Erika decided to grin and bear it. Even if there were no monsters or ghosts, the Seafarer’s Ruins were dangerous enough. There was no guarantee Eduard or some other explorer hadn’t set another life-threatening trap. She couldn’t leave the young Anne in a place like this.

Anyhow, I'm already used to terrible things happening to me.

Erika put on a self-deprecating smile. It wasn't something she *wanted* to be accustomed to, by any means, but she never had much say in the matter. Rather than being instantaneous, the curse's eight-hour delay was the epitome of mercy, and she felt strangely thankful to her brother for it.

She produced the crystal-powered pocket watch from her coat and checked the time. The needles indicated that it was a little past nine.

"It's alright. If we can make it out by five in the morning, we can still dispel it in time."

"Sure, you have time, but it's still a curse of death! It won't be too late to search for Anne after that..."

"But Anne is alone, you know? You might not show it, Claus, but you're awfully worried about her, aren't you?"

"Are you really okay with that? You're—"

"Tomorrow, we'll go for a tour of the Spring Palace gardens, all three of us. You're not worming your way out of it this time. It's a promise, Claus."

Rude as it might have been, Erika cut him off and changed the topic. On the contrary, it would be more difficult for her if he started showing her genuine concern.

Erika smiled at Claus. *It's always important to smile. I hope even the face of this little villainess can put him more at ease.*

"You're so..."

"With a time limit this lenient, I won't be dying without considerably terrible luck. I'm sure I'll be fine."

"I'm not sure how to tell you this, Erika... but when I look at you, I get the feeling that your luck kinda sucks."

She averted her eyes.

He had a point there. For one, Erika had unknowingly played Russian Roulette with five chests and hit the jackpot on her one and only try. That definitely said

something about her luck.

4

“Erika, does it hurt anywhere?”

“I’m perfectly fine, Claus.”

“I see. Then, do you feel sluggish? Cold? Anything?”

“I said I’m fine!”

“Alright. If anything feels off, just tell me. Don’t push yourself.”

“Yes, I’ll make sure to keep you in the loop.”

Erika and Claus had split up to classify the items from Eduard’s storage chests. With all the unknown wands and scrolls, it was possible they could carelessly activate some absurd magic, so analysis was indispensable.

While Erika worked on the wands, Claus analyzed the scrolls and spell cards. At least, that was supposed to be the plan, but Claus frequently stopped whatever he was doing to cast nervous glances her way.

“Erika, you really are...”

She returned his pitying eyes with a mild glare.

“You worry too much. I’m quite alright, so please concentrate on your work.”

“Yeah... Sorry. My bad.”

From Erika’s point of view, Claus was looking at her with the same eyes Eduard had once when she’d caught a mean cold. Were those two such worrywarts because they were eldest sons with little sisters?

Just as Eduard was a good person despite his dark, scheming smile, perhaps Claus was a good person beneath his sadistic tendencies.

“How are things on your end, Claus?”

“From what Glámr-Sight tells me, none of them are cursed. I should be able to use the spell cards for Hafan magic, no problem. Looking over the scrolls will take a little more time.”

“That’s good news. Please don’t forget to replenish any lost mana with a potion.”

“Yes, I know. How about you, Erika?”

From her parchment, Erika read out the list of wands she had identified thus far: a Death wand, a Fire Bolt wand, a Lightning Bolt wand, and a Magic Missile wand. They had all been in the booby-trapped chest. While they didn’t have many uses left, they were powerful offensive wands.

She couldn’t really blame Eduard for being so wary of theft.

“Eduard’s hand-me-downs?”

“The fact that his offensive wands have been used so many times must mean he was involved in some considerably large-scale combat.”

“I see. I was wondering why I didn’t see any sign of monsters in these ruins... He must have taken care of them.”

“Hopefully.”

Right, the Seafarer’s Ruins had already been cleaned out. Erika mentally thanked her brother yet again. The maze’s mechanisms already troubled her enough; the thought of monsters prowling around on top of that sent a chill down her spine.

“Oh! That’s a good one!”

Claus had been quietly glancing down at his notes up to that point, but he suddenly cried out in excitement. He’d been in good spirits ever since his mana was restored.

Erika took a break from stuffing things into her bag to take a peek at the scroll Claus had spread out before him.

“Did you find some useful magic?”

“It’s just what we need. This scroll is embedded with the Wall-Phase spell!”

He pointed between the scroll and a page of his notes with feverish excitement. As she was unable to read Hafan terminology, Erika was a little bewildered, but she did her best to follow along.

Claus' notepad was crammed tight with the results of his magic research. Erika fondly remembered how Claus from *Liber Monstrorum* was never seen without his own thick, leather-bound tome.

This is how a diligent genius is born, she mused.

"Magic that allows you to freely pass through walls? That sounds so convenient that it's almost unfair."

"It hurts a little to do it like this, but right now, we're in a race against time."

"You're right." Erika nodded. With both Anne's life and hers at stake, there was no time to waste painstakingly wandering the maze. Even Eduard had prepared this rule-breaking spell for his own expedition.

Erika decided to just accept her big brother's little cheat.

"Having this just makes me detest the moving corridors even more. If this were a normal maze, we could just walk through it from one end to the other."

"If we don't know the rules behind how it works, it wouldn't be strange for us to make a fatal mistake."

The Seafarer's Ruins changed over time, and it also changed based on shifting weight. It wasn't as if Eduard had left a message in every single room. And even if they did have hints, it was unreasonable to try to figure out the laws of the labyrinth given what little time they had.

"If only we could at least keep it from changing," Claus groaned.

"Then we either have to control time or weight."

"Time manipulation is one of the most powerful forms of magic. I've memorized the spell, but I'm too immature to use it. It's never succeeded, not once."

"You've already memorized such a high-level spell?"

"Anyone can commit words to memory. You're only first-rate when you can actually put them into practice."

"Then I'm sure you'll be able to do it once you become an adult."

"No, it seems I lack emotional strength. It must be because I've never

experienced any terrifically strong emotions in my life.”

Erika took in his sincere expression with a hint of admiration.

But if time manipulation doesn't work, that only leaves weight. How can we trick the weight sensors? Weight, weight, weight... Ah, maybe that wand can do it.

“Claus, I have a Levitate wand. If we combine that with the Wall-Phase scroll —”

“Oho, flying magic! Then we can essentially ignore the changing labyrinth!”

The Levitate wand's shaft was carved from the fossilized bones of a large winged wyvern. Its tip was amber, and its brass handle was carved in the likeness of a feather. The wick was a fossilized plume from an Urvogel.

It was an incredibly expensive wand, but now was not the time to be stingy.

Unlike the Flight spell, Levitate did not allow for finer adjustments to altitude, but if they wanted to avoid the maze's contraptions, floating even a little above the ground would be enough.

“Looks like we have a plan,” Claus declared. “We'll use the Levitate wand and Wall-Phase scroll in tandem to search every corner of every floor, one at a time.”

“If we throw in the Urðr-Sight wand, too, we should be able to cut our time down quite a bit.”

“We have two Wall-Phase scrolls. Considering we'll need one to get out of here, we should turn back if we can't find Anne before the first one runs out.”

“I suppose we have no choice. In that case, let's leave some notes to safely guide her to Eduard's camp.”

With only the moon-gallnut ink on the walls, the weather might prevent Anne from noticing at all. Dropping pieces of parchment with detailed instructions in conspicuous places such as doorways would certainly raise her chances of finding them.

“I know I'm repeating myself, but if you start feeling off in any way whatsoever, we're getting out of here. No matter how much time is left on the

Wall-Phase spell.”

“Claus, I...”

“I’m worried about Anne, but I will never forgive myself if I let anything happen to you. If only I’d been a little more cautious, if I had just looked at the mana around that chest, we could have prevented that trap.”

Erika was both thankful for his sincere conviction and happy to see how worried he was for her sake. Still, she had tripped the trap with her own carelessness; there was no reason for Claus to feel responsible. Feeling pessimistic, she pushed to close the lid on the subject.

“You’re pretty persistent, Claus. Please keep your concern for me in moderation.”

“You...”

He fell silent, a frown on his face. By now they had finished sorting through supplies, so they prepared to depart.

Claus had found a belt in the supply chest that was made to hold the potion vials. He wrapped it around his waist, over the robe, and filled every single one of its specially shaped metal slots with a mana restoration potion. After drinking three of the potions, which the belt couldn’t hold, he tucked the rest into a cloth bag over his shoulder.

Three at once... He’s only ten, but his mana capacity is immense.

Erika was genuinely impressed. She had once heard that an average adult magician could fill up on only two potions.

One’s maximum mana capacity was a result of daily training, meaning it was brought about by sheer hard work and effort. As Claus was only a young boy, he had surely worked harder than anyone else. Erika couldn’t help but admire him.

“What? What are you looking at me like that for?” Claus’ face suddenly flushed as he noticed her gaze.

“I was just thinking that you sure have a lot of mana. Were those potions enough to completely replenish your stock?”

“Oh, so that’s what this is about. Well, if my long-range magic wasn’t being

cut off, I'd have enough to run search magic through every floor we've been to all at once."

"Wait, Claus, now that I've gotten a better look at you, your face is quite red. Are you holding up alright?"

Erika moved her face right in front of his as soon as she noticed a change in his complexion. Her concerned stare was turning him redder and redder.

"Erm, yes... I wonder why. Perhaps the potions are alcoholic...?"

Claus turned his head the other way and began organizing his spell cards at an incredible pace. His dexterity was reminiscent of a master illusionist shuffling a deck of playing cards. Separating them into piles of twenty, he slid them into an assortment of pockets hidden all throughout his robe.

Hm? How many of those did he take with him?

Just a slight glance, and Erika could see far more than 300 spell cards stuffed up one of his sleeves.

"Don't tell me you took every single card... There were at least two thousand of them."

"We might run into a dangerous monster if we keep going down. Two thousand is hardly enough."

"You Hafan magicians have it rough."

"We value preparation just as much as you do. Fundamentally, we're the same as Aurelian alchemists. We differ greatly from Lucanlandt's swordsmen, who need only their own bodies, and Ignitia's dragoons, who are peerless so long as they have their dragons."

"And yet you came to the ruins so lightly equipped..."

"There was something wrong with me then, I'll admit. I'm repenting. I won't do it again."

It was hard to retort when he was already feeling so ashamed. Claus' conduct originated from the vampyre's curse to begin with, so she didn't intend to condemn him for it.

“I understand. I’ll trust you on that.”

Erika tied her lantern to her leather bag and equipped a belt fitted with wand holsters. She took two Magic Missile and Lightning Bolt wands from the offensive stash as well as a Levitate, Feather Fall, and Urðr-Sight wand from her utility set and stuck them all into the holsters. Too many, and it would be too confusing to select the right one at a moment’s notice. These would be enough.

“Keep a manageable amount in your belt, and swap them out with your bag to adapt to the situation. That’s how an alchemist fights.”

She recalled what Eduard once told her.

“Oh, Claus, you should take these—a Levitate wand and a Feather Fall wand. They’re both pretty short-range, so please refrain from using them on the move.”

“I understand the Levitate wand, but when am I supposed to use a Feather Fall wand?”

“It’s indispensable. There’s no guarantee this place doesn’t have pitfalls, or you might need it if you levitate too high. Levitation magic is more finicky than I’d like to admit, and it’s easy to accidentally wave it a few too many times.”

“How bad *is* it, exactly?”

“Waving it once generally gets you five centimeters of lift. Stack it again for twenty-five. Another for one hundred and twenty-five. You rise exponentially higher with each swing.”

“Hmm, that’s interesting.”

Claus was staring at the wand like a child eyeing a brand-new toy, so Erika was certain she would have to keep him from waving the Levitate wand in excess.

“Let’s get going, Erika. We’re running out of time.”

“Yes, of course. We don’t have a second to waste.”

Once Claus had finished reading through the Wall-Phase scroll, a white light spread out from his staff and deployed a magic circle over their heads. Beads of light emerged from the circle and showered down upon them like raindrops.

The drops phased straight through the both of them, rippling as they touched the ground and forming yet another circle. These two circles slowly crossed to sandwich them, and the children were enveloped by the white tracks of light left in their wake.

After reaching out to the nearest wall and confirming that the magic had indeed done its job, Erika swung her wand of amber, bone, brass, and plume twice. Feathers made of golden light danced through the air and fell to the ground at their feet. The feathers burst upon coming into contact with their shoes, their atomized components reshaping into golden circles.

Levitation magic spread out and covered their soles, hoisting Erika and Claus up into the air. The two held hands to make sure they didn't lose each other, then kicked at the empty air below, sending themselves barreling straight through the solid wall ahead.

5

For both Erika and Claus, this was their first time experiencing a Wall-Phase spell. As their physical bodies merged into the solid matter, they were graced by an unknown, incomprehensible sensation.

No, wait, thought Erika. This actually feels kinda familiar.

She dredged up the memories of a life gone by.

Yes, this is like walking through a strip curtain. It's like a three-meter corridor made of rows upon rows of strip curtains running the length of my entire body.

Erika had never expected to feel a sense of familiarity *here* of all places.



What exactly is magic, anyway? Oh, but this is surprisingly fun!

The Levitate wand's effect would last approximately ten minutes. One could tell it was about to end when the magic circles on the soles of their feet had shrunk by half.

Before the magic would no longer be able to support their weight, Erika and Claus swung their wands again.

"Hey, maybe on the way back we could just phase straight through the outer wall of the ruins like this," Claus suggested. "Don't you think it would save some of your wand uses?"

"That's a little too risky."

"Why's that?"

"The Seafarer's Ruins are surrounded by considerably thick bedrock. If we get lost in it and don't make it out before the spell runs out..."

"We'll be crushed to death. Tragic."

"Very tragic. Additionally, even if we do get through the rock, the outside is mostly surrounded by sea. If we get our angle wrong..."

"We'll drown. Brutal."

"Too brutal. I don't want to have to deal with any more absurd deaths."

"More... what?"

"Nothing, just talking to myself."

"Uhh..."

Claus was looking at her with suspicion, so Erika hurriedly averted her eyes. She had quite nearly run her mouth about the colorful compendium of little Erika's mysterious deaths in *Liber Monstrorum*. Who would believe something so ridiculous as past-life memories?

Since her mouth was sealed tighter than a clam, Claus shook his head in resignation.

"Whatever. Just keep your eyes peeled," he said with a sigh, and she was

immensely relieved to hear he wasn't going to dig deeper.

From then on, the two of them explored at a breakneck pace. Now that they could access every room, they were finally beginning to see Anne in their Urðr-Sight.

The images were all from a considerable while ago. Even if they wanted to follow Anne's traces, the labyrinth had already changed, and her specter would quickly vanish into a passage that no longer existed. Nevertheless, Claus seemed more at ease, if only slightly. Surely this was because he was finally seeing Anne moving around, alive and well.

I need to get him to the real one, and fast, thought Erika.

What would happen if the siblings were parted by death? Imagining such a dreary future made her chest ache.

"Hold it, Erika. There's something there."

It happened two floors below where they had found Eduard's camp. Claus spread his arms out to cover Erika and stared down the corridor.

"Really? What is it?"

"There are vibrations in the air, and I can hear something dragging along the floor. Must be some monster or beast your brother missed."

Claus' words caught her off-guard. *A monster? Now?* She was definitely equipped for battle, but she clearly wasn't mentally prepared for actual combat. She started off by sharpening her ears; a faint grating noise was certainly approaching them bit by bit.

Were they better off running or attacking? She had no idea, so she looked to Claus.

"Don't move yet. Stay behind me."

"Okay, got it."

Still protecting Erika behind him, Claus readied his staff like a spear at waist height. Erika, meanwhile, tried to swap out the wand in her hand and froze mid-motion. Support? Attack? Should she have taken out her Paralyze wand?

“Don’t overdo it. Be ready to run at any time.”

“Y-Yes...”

“I’ll keep you safe. Your job, for starters, is to calm down. A panicking ally is scarier than an enemy on the battlefield.”

“You’re pretty calm, Claus.”

“I’ve been trained for combat, and I’ve accompanied my father on hunts and exorcisms before.”

Erika was surprised to hear that the duke and his son personally ventured out to perform exorcisms. Back when the dukes were still kings, however, Hafan’s royalty doubled as an assembly of the highest priests in service to their aboriginal sun god. The tradition must have carried on.

A squirming shadow emerged from around the corner. Claus swiftly snatched two spell cards from his breast pocket, threw them at the shadow, and quickly chanted a short incantation. The cards deployed a circle as they flew, forking off in different directions as each emitted a powerful glow. They landed on opposite sides, the top right and bottom left of the corridor, shedding light on the identity of their shadowy foe.

“A moving amalgamation of bone?! How many died to make this thing?!”

It was a crude collection of the bones of various beasts suspended in the air. How many dozens... no, *hundreds* of creatures had those bones belonged to? The creeping horror was so massive that it was impossible to tell their original numbers; it occupied the entirety of the corridor from wall to wall, undulating as it approached them.

“It has enough magic resistance to fend off my Glámr-Sight. No, wait, this monster boasts a magic composition I’ve never heard of...? What is this thing?!”

“Claus, that’s—”

“Listen up. When I give the signal, back away without turning around. If you charge in a straight line with your Levitate wand, the Wall-Phase spell should last you to the exit.”

Claus’ face was tense. After shooting a fleeting glance at Erika, he pulled

about a hundred spell cards from his sleeve. No matter how much combat experience he had, it would definitely be a difficult battle against an undead foe composed of so many corpses. Having encountered such a massive creature, it would be difficult for him to return alive.

But Erika, on the contrary, was relieved the moment she saw the monster.

“It’s alright, Claus.”

“What?”

“That is an automaton made by my brother—an acid-hydrogel golem.”

“Huh?!”

The mass of bones stretching out far and wide before them was no undead; the bones were simply suspended in transparent gel. Unlike a normal golem, this gelatinous golem wasn’t humanoid and instead resembled a cube.

Its flexible body allowed it to occupy the entire corridor, swallowing everything in its path without leaving so much as a scrap as it oozed along the floor.

A few days before her past-life memories had returned, Erika remembered seeing a prototype of it in Eduard’s room. It had looked like a quivering lump of apple jelly.

At the time, she just thought it seemed somewhat convenient, and she never could’ve imagined that the real one would be this big.

There you go again, Eduard... It required so many rare materials, yet you upscaled it this much.

“Its innards are made of a strong acid, but the outside is a neutral, semi-solid gel,” Erika explained, staring in wonder at her brother’s creation. “It only dissolves dead bodies; any valuable materials it comes in contact with are coated in the neutral substance and protected. A smart and safe golem, he said.”

“What?! Why did he release something like that in this labyrinth?!”

“To clean up, I assume. You can see just how many monster corpses there were. The bones were preserved so he could collect them for his research

later.”

“God! How misleading!”

My thoughts exactly. Erika shot him a wry smile. But she would prefer it if he directed those complaints at Eduard.

As she was talking with Claus, Erika realized something else.

“Ah, if we charge into it with Wall-Phase active, we’ll go through its outer wall and die instantly.”

“Curse you, Eduard Aurelia! How dangerous can you be?!”

“I should probably deactivate it while we’re searching.”

Eduard’s a kind, soft-spoken soul. Unfortunately, he has no mercy or inhibitions where alchemy is concerned.

Erika realized that if they had continued their charge through this floor without noticing the golem, her and Claus’ skeletons would be floating with the rest of them. It was beginning to occur to her that her own death flags had practically all been raised by Eduard.

The star crystal necklace. The death trap on the trunk. A Wall-Phase scroll, combined with the dangerously acidic golem.

“Are you alright, Erika? You have a dark look on your face. Is something wrong?”

“Huh? Me? I-I’m fine, Claus.”

Claus’ voice snapped her back to her senses.

Yeah, let’s not go there. I was almost swallowed up by the darkness in my heart. How could I possibly suspect that someone as kind as Eduard was actually trying to murder his little sister? Let’s trust people a bit more.

Changing gears, Erika began the necessary work to deactivate the golem. With a normal golem of clay or metal, this would be a hard task for anyone besides the original creator. Against a transparent, slow-moving golem, however, even Erika could work with it.

She first stepped out in front of the quivering gelatinous cube, held up her

lantern, and inspected its innards. With Glámr-Sight, she immediately spotted an ostrakon engraved with sigils among the countless bones. This was its core.

Huh? There's something floating near the core...

She spared no time in alerting her traveling companion, "Claus, there's something floating inside the golem..."

"Hm? What is it?"

"Over there. Doesn't that look like Anne's hairpin?"

Claus stared long and hard at the item, which was suspended in the cube about a meter off the ground. It was white and presumably made of fine china or bone. The metal fastener seemed to have melted, but its characteristic flower-shaped ornaments still remained.

"No...!"

"Don't worry, Anne couldn't have been using a Wall-Phase spell."

Claus was clutching the fabric around his heart, a painfully wretched expression on his face.

"Anne isn't in there. The golem must have picked that up after she dropped it."

"Yeah... Yeah, you're right. From what I can see, there are no human bones. Got it. I'm fine."

Claus was deathly pale, and he didn't look the least bit fine. He looked far more cornered now than when he'd thought he would be fighting a powerful undead adversary.

While he was jumping the gun a little, Erika could hardly blame him; his sister's life was at stake, after all. Despite his brave front, Claus was still only ten years old. The stress this was placing on his heart was unfathomable.

Let's hope this clue helps lead us to Anne.

"The acid might splash out, so we should stand back."

Erika retreated before pulling out a Mage Hand wand from her leather bag.

This wand's shaft was made of yew. Its tip was white opal, and the handle was

made of gold designed to look like a spider's web and spindly feet. The wick was the leg of a gigantic old spider.

When she waved it in her left hand, small, iridescent magic circles surrounded the five fingers of her right hand like rings. Thanks to the Glámr-Sight, she could perceive the formation of invisible fingers inside the golem.

Erika tried opening and closing her hand.

Alright, it's working.

She felt the invisible fingers flex to mimic her movements.

So long as she could reach the core, stopping the golem was simple. Erika moved her unseen appendages, reaching out to grab the ostrakon. She scraped away just one letter from the word "truth"—*emet*—carved into it, rendering it *met*, meaning "dead."

The golem immediately began to lose its shape, rippling and churning like water brought to a rapid boil, then promptly melted into the ground.

"I see, so this is the death of a golem," Claus muttered in awe. It was rare to see a golem's demise outside of Aurelia.

The rainbow-colored circles on Erika's hand quickly faded. She must have used too much strength to scrape at the letter. With how fragile it was, Mage Hand was only really useful for delicate work.

Anne's hair ornament and the golem's core fell to the ground amid the hordes of bones. Erika splashed some drinking water over the core to wash away the acid before picking it up. She would need to return it to Eduard later.

Claus retrieved Anne's hairpin. It was a lovely ornament with elaborate patterns mimicking the flowers on a tea olive tree.

"This is made from the horn of one of the many unicorns that inhabit Hafan's forests. It's Anne's, no doubt about it."

"That means Anne must have passed through here."

Ten meters beyond the corner, however, they hit a dead end. The two waved their Urðr-Sight wands together and saw Anne walking toward the very same spot. Her expression turned to shock, and she left in a hurry. Perhaps due to her

panic, she didn't seem to notice she had dropped her hairpin.

She must have seen the lump of bones in the golem, Erika surmised. She heard Claus' relieved sigh beside her.

"It really feels like we're getting closer to Anne," she said. "Although the maze has already changed."

"It's fine. As long as we know the direction, we can use the Wall-Phase scroll."

They still had some time before the first scroll ran out. If they managed to find her soon, they could use the second one to escape together. At least, Erika hoped they'd be able to catch up to Anne before she encountered an ancient, evil spirit.

Erika and Claus recast their Levitate magic, quietly kicking off in the direction Anne had gone.

6

Using Anne's past traces to guide them, they descended the stairs. They were now on the eighth floor.

Just how deep are we going to go?

Another stairway, no different from the last, put them on yet another level of dreary stone.

However, the scene before them was completely different from any other they had seen in the Seafarer's Ruins. The stench of death filled the air.

Husks of unfamiliar life-forms littered the ground—bloodstained mammals, mangled reptiles, and crushed giant insects among them. Monsters with far too many legs had been burnt to a crisp, and blood and flesh was scattered about in many, many small pieces.

Erika felt dizzy.

Somewhat fortunately, the corpses had been partially preserved with magic, so the rotting smell hadn't gotten too bad. She was also lucky that none of the corpses belonged to animals she was familiar with; they were all bizarre,

grotesque monsters.

Otherwise, Erika might not have been able to resist the urge to vomit.

The sights and smells were so unnatural to her that she was able to dissociate, and she instead imagined that the carnage before her was merely a scene from a movie or some sort of video game.

Haha... Looks like a gaming addiction can sometimes prove useful.

While this thought certainly fell short of bringing a smile to her face, she at least managed to keep herself from panicking.

“Urgh... Ngh, you okay, Erika?”

“Surprisingly. You?”

“I’m already used to this type of stuff. Yes, stuff. You know, Father and I went to that one place and did that stuff with those things, so...”

“Umm, you’re kind of all over the place, Claus.”

Erika was glad she had someone to talk to. The impact of gory movies could be lessened quite a bit when two people were watching. But Anne, who had seen this alone, was surely much worse off than either one of them.

“Let’s hurry,” Claus urged. “Anne must be close by, I’m sure of it.”

“Right. She’s probably huddled in a corner somewhere...”

A majority of pillars in the room had collapsed, and there were gaping holes all over the place. The giant gears that shifted the labyrinth were exposed and even damaged in certain places. Someone had used terrifying destructive power here.

“No wonder your brother saved up so many supplies.”

“He was taking on tons of monsters, after all.”

“I was certain we were fully equipped when we left camp, but now I’m not so sure. I shudder to think what would happen if these corpses were all alive and moving.”

Erika also felt a chill. If Eduard’s party hadn’t performed a clean sweep of the monsters, there was no telling what would have become of her, or Claus, or

Anne by now. She and Claus were finally starting to see why the Seafarer's Ruins were said to be the most dangerous place in all of Aurelia.



After walking a while longer, Erika and Claus came to a stop in front of one room in particular. A note had been written by the entrance in moon-gallnut ink.

"Do not step... star... Huh? It's gone."

"A thick cloud must be passing over the moon. I believe the first line said, 'Do not step on the stars.'"

"Something to that effect..."

"I don't know what will happen if you step on them, but we haven't seen any stars on the floor so far. No need to worry just yet."

Erika was growing a bit anxious. Eduard's notes had always been directions; this was the first time he had written a warning. Erika made a mental note to keep her eyes peeled whenever she entered a room from now on. She wouldn't want to miss a star marking just because it wasn't glowing.

Also, the Levitate spell is about to run out, so I should wave the wand again while I have the chance.

All of a sudden, Claus crouched down on the spot, examining something at his feet.

"Did you find a star?"

"No, it's not that. This is an Eastern spell card. Alarm magic. Its range has been decreased to raise its accuracy. This specialty belongs to..."

Claus jumped to his feet. He entered the room, carefully strafing around the spell card.

"Anne! Are you in here?!"

The room was relatively less damaged than the last. Claus headed closer to a small girl curled up and cowering in the corner.

The girl lifted her head upon noticing Claus and Erika.

Oh, good. We made it in time! Erika breathed a sigh of relief.

“Claus...? And Erika?” the girl murmured in a feeble voice.

The lantern at the end of the staff illuminated her face, which closely resembled Claus’.

Anne was pale from fatigue and dread. One look at her face was enough to tell how hard the journey had been for her. Her cheeks bore the trails of numerous tears.

She started crying all over again, but the meaning behind her tears had shifted.

Claus raced over and hugged her. Anne hugged him back.

“Claus... Oh, Claus! You... You big idiot!”

“I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. It’s because of me that you had to go through such terrifying ordeals...”

“I was so lonely,” she sobbed. “I was so scared...”

“Yeah, I’m really sorry.”

Reuniting with Claus must have opened the floodgates. What started as a whimper exploded into a spell of loud bawling. As Claus patted her head with the gentle expression of a caring big brother, Anne pounded her small fists on his chest like a spoiled child.



“I’m glad you’re alright. I was so worried about you.”

“Oh... That should be my line. Look, you even troubled Miss Erika!”

“Yes, it’s all my fault. You came to these dangerous ruins to stop me, didn’t you?”

“Huh?”

“Hm?”

There seemed to be a peculiar disconnect between them.

“Um, yes. That’s right. I thought I could bring you back peacefully so Father wouldn’t have to know. You’d best be thankful.”

“I see. So you were looking out for me.”

Claus seemed to take her at face value, but Erika noticed the girl’s eyes wandering.

Yeah, can’t say I didn’t see it coming.

If stopping Claus was her sole objective, she would have stopped him when he was trying to put her into a magical sleep. The topic of the ruins had come up during dinner, and Anne must have developed an interest in them as well.

Like brother, like sister. Erika offered a tired chuckle.

Once she had finished crying and regained her composure, Anne parted from Claus. Wiping away her tears, she straightened her back and turned to Erika.

“I’m sorry for causing you so much trouble, Erika.”

“It’s perfectly alright, Anne. I’m just glad you’re safe.”

“Oh, Erika...”

Since Anne was getting teary again, Erika carefully wiped her eyes with a crisp handkerchief. The girl’s face broke out in a smile, the very same one she had shown in the garden.

Erika could finally have some peace of mind.

I had a terrible feeling when we reached this floor, but it looks like everything has ended peacefully! If we make it out of the Seafarer’s Ruins without issue, I’ll

have successfully avoided my first death flag. All that's left is to read the scroll, swing the wand, cross the gate, go home, and get some sleep. Pretty simple, all things considered.

Perhaps there was a lecture in store from their guardians, but it was nothing compared to the perils they could have faced down here. She had managed to avoid an event that would have caused her demise in six years' time.

Claus took out a mana restoration potion and pressed it to his sister's lips. She had also lost a large portion of her mana while exploring the ruins.

I'm actually surprised she held on for so long by herself.

Erika was rather impressed. The fact that Anne specialized in precise, concentrated spells rather than long-range ones meant she had an advantage in this particular kind of labyrinth.

Now then, it's not over until it's over, as they say. This does feel like a load off my shoulders, but who knows what's going to happen on the way back? We should rest here until Anne's in a condition to move again.

"Oh?"

Erika looked around. The labyrinth was beginning to shift once more, but she felt something was off about it. She had heard this sound all too frequently since entering the ruins. Before she knew it, she had grown accustomed and driven it from her mind.

This one feels like it's going on for a terribly long time, though.

She looked back toward the path they had come from. There wasn't anything particularly unusual; just some stone scarred by combat and plenty of corpses.

"What's wrong, Erika?"

"Well, how should I put this? Something feels off..."

Forget stopping—the whirring gradually grew louder and louder. If it wasn't just her paranoia kicking in, it was almost as if it was *approaching* them.

"Oh, right. It's been bothering me for a while now, but do you know what that's supposed to mean?" Anne asked, pointing.

“That’ ...?”

“Yes. I think it’s moon-gallnut ink, but...”

“Huh?! Erika, snuff the lantern!” Claus yelped. He wrapped his sleeve around the lantern hung on his own staff while Erika stuffed hers into her bag.

The clouds looming in front of the moon outside must have chosen that exact moment to clear. As the children looked on, the entirety of the floor overflowed with golden-yellow specks spread across a blanket of pale blue.

All three of them were standing over a starry sky painted with moon-gallnut ink.

A chill raced down Erika’s spine as she once again recalled the warning at the entrance.

Do not step on the stars, or else—

Or else what? What was going to happen? Erika timidly slid her shoes out of the danger zone. There was a star right where she had been standing.

I know I’m unlucky, but come on...

She cursed her ill fortune and ill-preparedness. She had even been warned!

The sound of crumbling rock was interrupted by Claus’ scream. “Anne! Erika! Your hands!”

Erika’s field of vision was beginning to tilt diagonally. No, it was the labyrinth’s very floor that was beginning to tilt. The hard stone surged and dipped like a stormy sea.

The floor, the walls, the pillars, and the ceiling—the entire room crumbled and fell.

Erika, Claus, and Anne were thrown straight into free fall.

Seriously? This is where I die? Just when we finally found each other!

Erika condemned herself sharply in her own mind. Claus just barely managed to grab Anne, as she was close enough, but Erika had given the siblings some space for an emotional reunion and therefore fell separately.

Protecting Anne, Claus deployed several hundred spell cards like an umbrella.

He had erected a protective circle to defend her from the falling debris. Neither Erika nor Claus needed to worry about this, as the Wall-Phase spell let all the rubble pass through them.

“Claus! The Feather Fall wand!”

“Got it!”

Erika barked a short order before pulling out her own wand as well. She and Claus swung them in unison.

Below them, a white magic circle spread out like a thin membrane. As they burst through it, the circle disintegrated into small, feather-like shapes. The children were surrounded by a soft wall of air, as if gravity had dissipated, and something gentle was supporting their bodies.

Their fall speed dropped drastically. The shattered stone and remnants of labyrinth gears raced past them to the bottom.

“Anne! Are you okay?”

“Y-Yes! Thanks to Claus, I’m unharmed!”

“How about you, Erika?”

“I’m fine. Couldn’t be better.”

Claus and Anne reached out for Erika, but five meters was a difficult distance to span.

Erika retrieved her animated rope from her bag and gave it an order.

“Stretch like a snake! Fasten like a hawser!”

Like a serpent striking at its prey, the rope coiled up and then shot forward. It drew a gentle parabola in the air before firmly twining around Claus’ arm.

“You really are well-prepared.”

“I may not be much, but I’m still an Aurelian alchemist!”

And it was technically my brother who prepared it, not me. Erika never wasted an opportunity to deride herself.

Claus pulled at the rope, dragging Erika closer and closer until she was under

his umbrella. The three of them were finally together again.

“What exactly was that?” Claus asked. “Another trap?”

“Rather than a trap, I think it was a trap malfunction.”

“How do you figure?”

“Presumably, while my brother and his friends fought monsters, the mechanisms along with the floor and pillars took heavy damage.”

“Yeah, there were spots where I could see the gears. The labyrinth tried to shift, but it couldn’t withstand the movements, I guess.”

Come to think of it, there were other peculiarities as well. So many monster corpses down here had been left practically untouched, yet a golem had been deployed to collect materials just one floor up. Perhaps her brother had decided not to station a golem here on purpose, knowing the floor might collapse if the labyrinth was activated.

But Eduard, how was your hint supposed to tell me the whole place was going down?!

The shaft made by the accident was surprisingly deep and wide. They had surely fallen a considerable distance by now, but the bottom was still nowhere in sight. The surfaces around them were filled with manmade slots for star crystal lamps. It was as if they were in a cathedral over a hundred meters tall.

It took a while before they heard the echo of the crumbled floor hitting the bottom.

“Ah...”

“What is it, Anne?” Erika asked her.

“Erm, no, it’s just kind of beautiful...”

Before they knew it, the star crystals in the walls began to let off a faint light, reacting to their mana. With their arms linked in a ring, they slowly descended through the spectacle.

“I’m sorry, I know now’s not the time.”

“Oh no. It’s fine. I was thinking the same thing.” All things considered, this

vertical shaft of star crystal alone was a wonderful experience.

With no heed to their anxiety and wonder, the Feather Fall magic softly carried them down to the ruins' deepest depths.



It took a while, but Erika, Claus, and Anne eventually reached the bottom of the Seafarer's Ruins. The structure and ornaments resembled a temple from the old days of Aurelia.

They had landed in what seemed like the nave, and an archway separated them from the inner sanctum. Along the sides of the arch—where a modern church might have its statues of Aurelia's old kings and dukes—was the solitary sculpture of a legendary alchemist, who was said to have lived in the era before the Seafaring Tribe graced this continent.

That was as much as Erika could recognize, but from what she could tell, the various bizarre bits and pieces marked this as the innermost room of the labyrinth.

First off, the ceiling was an atrium several hundred meters high. There were no windows, of course. The walls by the aisles where windows would've been were carved with constellations that could not be seen from these lands—constellations with legacies that had been passed down from alchemist to alchemist.

They formed the reliefs of legendary figures, monsters, animals, and tools for sailing. The points where the stars aligned to draw their shapes were set in star crystal, giving off a pale blue glimmer.

The floor was a mess, scattered with the monster corpses and rubble that had fallen from the eighth floor. Erika saw this as beyond her control, but feared her ancestors would be angry at her.

A number of magic circles that had been surrounding Erika and Claus dispersed into beads of light and were swept away. She took a glance at her pocket watch. It must have been the Wall-Phase spell running out.

"Thankfully, the cave-in's over," Claus piped up. "My protection wouldn't hold if another large rock came crashing down on us."

“This must be a precious place for the people of Aurelia. I wouldn’t want falling rocks to damage it any further,” said Anne, looking around in wonder.

“Quite right. It has a rather solemn air. Is this a church, Erika?”

“Yes, I’m pretty sure it is, but...” Erika carefully took a look around.

At the inner sanctum of the temple, where there would usually be an altar dedicated to St. Breandán, stood a megalith of pure star crystal. It had a few cracks running down it now, thanks to the debris.

Erika stared at it. “That *should* be an altar to the Seafarer’s god Brean, I think.” She tilted her head.

While the material might differ, a large, upright stone should signify Aurelia’s god. Why did she feel that something wasn’t quite right?

Aurelia’s ancient god, Brean, otherwise known as St. Breandán, was worshiped in the form of a menhir. Before, when the regions were still divided into kingdoms, the west had revered Brean as the god of stars, sailing, and alchemy. However, when the continent was united, Aurelia was converted to the same religion as the other three to form a shared sense of national identity.

The religion of these united kingdoms was supposed to be the monotheistic faith Ignitia had brought from the southern continent. However, Ignitia’s religion did have some tolerance for other gods, and as a part of the unification, Ignitia officially welcomed them by making them angels and saints.

Thus, Aurelia’s ancient god Brean became St. Breandán, a saint in service to Ignitia’s one true god. His worship continued to this day.

But according to Liber Monstrorum, shouldn’t there be a seal for that old, evil spirit around here somewhere? All I see is a shrine to an old god.

When she squinted, she could make out letters running down the megalith. They were from the ancient Aurelian alphabet, which was still used to enchant tools. Though she had trouble with languages beyond her own, Erika could still barely decipher it.

““Here I lay to rest the one who crossed the vast sea of stars and who accompanied me on my long journey. Sleep at peace, my nameless friend. I

pray this plentiful land may be your eternal cradle...’”

As Erika read out the words, Claus and Anne took on the pose of prayer.

“Perhaps it’s not an altar but a tomb,” Claus suggested. “I’m guessing it’s for a noble who passed right before the Seafaring Tribe reached Ichthyas.”

“That’s quite a tragic epitaph,” Anne said.

“Right. But why have my ancestors entombed him in the same way they would a god?”

Without any ill intent, Erika brushed a finger against the stone’s inscription.

Umm, is it just me, or did it just turn black where I touched it?

A voice resounded from somewhere far, far away. Vibrations coursed through the temple air. Soprano and bass all at once, it was like a stringed and brass instrument playing over one another. It was like a whale’s song. It was like an infant’s cries. But no matter the tone, the voice was melancholic.

Each time the voice rang out, the star crystal megalith was stained a darker shade from the inside. What had once glowed blue was now the pitch-black of a moonless night. Dark water flowed from the cracks on its surface. To Erika, it seemed like tears.

Her hair swayed in a sudden breeze, which carried the scent of salt.

Reacting to the surging mana, the light of the star crystals on the walls and ceiling grew. In no time at all, the overflowing blackness had covered the entire floor of the temple.

Erika raised black ripples as she shifted her boots. Just like her, Claus and Anne were both looking around in a panic. The three of them were met with a spectacle that should never have existed at the depths of the earth.

An endless black sea, stretching out to the horizon and beyond, and a sky full of stars overhead.

Chapter 3: The Megalith Altar

1

A melancholic cry resounded from far, far away. The walls and ceiling were a galaxy of blue star crystal. At their feet was a volume of dark water that far exceeded the megalith's capacity.

The sound of crashing waves, a whiff of salt, the dampness of the breeze, and a hint of homesickness had snuck their way into the children's hearts. It all seemed to be an attempt to delude them that they were not at the depths of the earth but instead staring out at a starry sky over the ocean.

They were being forced to remember a faraway sea—the one the Seafaring Tribe once called home.

Erika shook her head. *I need to get a grip. I do not long for any seas!*

She concentrated on the fact that she had never once ridden a ship in this lifetime, and that she had only spent a few hours aboard them in her past life, to drive these fantasies from her head.

"Claus! Anne! I have a bad feeling about this place. Let's hurry and get out—"

When Erika turned to face them, the Hafan siblings were writhing in pain atop the black tide.

"It's sad, so sad, so very sad... Oh, Claus, Erika... Save me... My head is..."

"Get ahold of yourself, Anne! You need to focus on resisting the magic!"

Anne's face was pale as she trembled, mumbling to herself in delirium.

Claus held her up, enveloping her in his protective circle barrier. He shoved a mana replenishing potion into Anne's mouth and forced her to drink. After making sure she swallowed, he downed one himself and chanted a few spells to add more layers to his barrier.

"Are you two okay?!"

“Do you not feel it, Erika?!”

“I managed to shake off the feeling. What even *is* it?”

“Oh, I see, you Aurelians are dull—I mean, strong when it comes to this sort of magic.”

He’d definitely said something just now about Aurelians being dull and therefore resistant to mind-altering magic. What’s more, Erika had her father’s seal of approval for being especially slow.

“Right now, our minds are under attack by a very strong spell. This one overwhelms its target with feelings of sorrow and homesickness until it ultimately claims their very soul.”

“I feared my heart would be stolen away by grief, and I would fade to nothing,” Anne croaked, still clearly in pain.

“I see. We’re in quite a predicament.” Erika moved into Claus’ circle just to be safe.

Before their eyes, the megalithic altar continued to change. The mass of star crystal melted, growing smaller and smaller as though the passage of months and years were eroding it away.

Gradually, the monsters littering the floor of the temple were consumed by the black water. First, the soft flesh and organs, then pelts, scales, and finally bones dissolved one after the next.

“Claus, are we in danger if we stay in this liquid?”

“No, this magic doesn’t work on intelligent life.”

“We would probably be done for if that psychological attack had managed to destroy our minds,” Anne added.

The Hafan siblings were gaining this information from their Glámr-Sight. Erika envied the speed and flexibility of the magicians’ techniques.

But thanks to them, I think I’m starting to understand.

She compared the current situation to the events in *Liber Monstrorum*. Originally, Anne was supposed to fall victim to the eighth floor’s collapse all by

herself. Naturally, she would've had neither a Feather Fall wand nor Claus' powerful defensive circle to help her.

Perhaps she'd used what faint mana she had left to erect her own defenses, but she wasn't able to protect herself completely. She was already heavily injured when she reached the temple.

What awaited Anne, as she was on the verge of death, was devastating, mind-altering magic and the black water that absorbed anyone and anything unfortunate enough to be caught in it. Assailed by these threats, Anne would subsequently be fused with the evil spirit.

That means this black water is actually...

As if to confirm Erika's suspicions, the water began to move. It gathered around the spot where the star crystal megalith had been, swirling as it rose up from the ground and began to condense.

"I knew it! That's the evil spirit!" Erika cried.

"The... what? Isn't this an altar to your god? Are there any spirits that take on liquid form? Claus? Erika?"

"I've never heard of such a thing," said Claus. "But sure enough, the magic structure of this liquid is similar to that of a spiritual being called a wraith..."

Erika's sudden words had thrown the siblings into confusion.

"That's..."

After a few moments of mulling over how she should tell them, Erika fell silent. She couldn't talk about *Liber Monstrorum* in a situation like this, and besides, she was sure they wouldn't believe her.

But this being a wraith makes it even stranger.

The evil spirit was supposed to belong to an alchemist who had been killed by his brethren because he had perfected the philosopher's stone. If it was once a living person, shouldn't it have been a ghost instead?

Through repeated expansion and contraction, the mass of black water gradually took shape. Its slick, liquid surface was soon covered in stiff, sturdy scales.

The creature had two curling horns like a ram, four limbs as thick as tree trunks with hooked claws growing out of them, and a spiked carapace of sorts atop its gargantuan body.

It was like a dragon or a tortoise, but it was truly neither. Erika had never seen or even heard of such a creature in this life or her last.

“GRRRRRRRAAAAAH!”

The monster’s roar echoed throughout the temple with nearly enough force to burst their eardrums. Their legs gave out before they could so much as think about running.

“What the heck is that?! You called it a spirit, but whether that thing is alive or dead, whether it’s a dragon or something else entirely, I can’t tell anything about it.”

“It’s supposed to be an evil spirit who led the Seafaring Tribe to this continent and created the philosopher’s stone, which could turn any substance in existence into gold. This thing *should* be the legendary alchemist, Zaratan.”

“Then why is someone so great an evil spirit now?”

“Well, they were... betrayed by my Aurelian ancestors, and their grudge...”
Erika trailed off, realizing something wasn’t quite right.

A grudge? Is a grudge enough to change their form to such a degree?

It was far too different from the spirit in *Liber Monstrorum*. It was impossible for her to believe that the monster towering before her was ever anything remotely human.

As the black monster gazed at Erika, its lips curled, as if sneering at her.

No, I must be imagining it.

Its animalistic cry gradually shifted to something resembling a human voice.

“You say... I was human? An alchemist? Bwahahaha... You have it all wrong, child. No, wait, you’re...”

The beast’s great body began to quiver.

It’s laughing? No, that’s not it.

The monster was enraged. Its body was shaking with uncontrollable anger.

“You... You’ve forgotten me, Aurelian?! I... I still remember... An eternity may pass, but I haven’t forgotten even for an instant! Your smell... and the pain you have caused me!”

“Pain? It really is you, then.”

“Aah, it brings me back... That face, the gold hair, those emerald eyes... And yet, it took only a few hundred years for you to forget! Forget me...! The one you murdered!”

Something hard struck Erika’s entire body all at once, blurring her vision. The wind was knocked out of her, and her brain was cut off from its oxygen supply. She was overcome with the same panic she’d felt in her past life when someone had abruptly pulled her into a swimming pool as a joke.

By the time she noticed it, Erika was being pressed into the stone floor by one of the monster’s massive forelimbs.

“Bwahahahaha! A gentle pat, and see what happens... Such weak life-forms you humans are! I see that’s one thing that takes more than a few centuries to change.”

“Ngh...! Haah, haah...”

“Bwahahaha, worry not, you coin-grubbing scoundrel. Oh no, I won’t kill you like this... An easy death is too good for you! You’ll get a full taste of it before you go. My pain, my regret, my loneliness, my... my...!”

“I believed in all of you! You were my friends! How dare you... How DARE you betray me!”

Black droplets spilled out from the empty eye sockets peering into Erika’s soul.

Yeah, that’s the one who was murdered. No doubt about it.

The legend wasn’t quite what it had been in *Liber Monstrorum*, but this was certainly the same individual who’d been betrayed by her Aurelian ancestors.

“Remember this... Carve it deep in your soul before the flame of your life goes out! Accursed descendent of gold-hungry pigs! Zaratan is not my name. I am

Zaratan just as you are Human. I am but a single Zaratan, a nameless Zaratan. One who forever lost the chance to know its name... thanks to you treacherous Aurelians!"

It was never truly talking to her. Every line it spoke was part of a monologue, heavy with anger, yet filled with such pain and anguish that it felt like her body was being torn apart.

Erika offered it as much of a nod as she could in her position.

Rather than the spell that had aimed to overwhelm her with sorrow and homesickness, it was, for some reason, the monster's resentment which penetrated her heart. Just as her heart threatened to go out to the beast, a small explosion broke out before her eyes, and the Zaratan's grip weakened.

The next instant, a rope wrapped around Erika's body, and she was forcefully yanked out of its clutches.

"I don't get it... Not a single word of it, monster. Stop talking like we're not here."

The Hafan siblings stood at the entrance to the inner sanctum. Claus brandished a Fire Bolt wand and his staff at the monster while Anne had a tight grip on the end of the animated rope wrapped around Erika.

I see, my bag... I must have dropped it when the Zaratan pinned me down.
Erika finally realized she had been saved.

"Erika! Are you injured?!" shouted Anne.

"I... I'm fine. You two saved me."

"Well, I'm *not* fine," said Claus.

"Erm, what's the matter, Claus?"

"You expect me to be fine and dandy after you nearly went off and died just now?! Carve this into your soul deeper than anything that monster says: I'll protect you, no matter what! So get rid of that damn look in your eyes like you've given up on everything!"

Oh, is that what he sees? Erika asked herself. She was aware she had sympathized with the monster's resentment, but what she felt was far from

resignation.

“Umm, you could be just a little bit more honest, you know...”

“I didn’t ask for your input, Anne! Undo the rope and give that stuff to Erika already!”

Anne sighed as she loosened the rope and handed over the leather bag and a wand. Holding up a pack of spell cards and her own staff, she stood a little behind Claus.

Erika shook off her stupor and assumed a battle stance with the wand Anne had given her.

The Zaratan was already standing tall once more, slowly trudging toward the three of them. While a burnt stench still lingered in the air, the monster’s body didn’t bear a single trace of damage. Had its hard scales protected it, or had it already regenerated?

“This takes me back... It’s all so terribly nostalgic. I remember now. The wand of a petty alchemist, is it? It’s been so long that it took me by surprise, but such trivial parlor tricks won’t work a second time.”

“I see. Then prepare to be amazed by Hafan’s marvelous craft. You won’t need a second chance to see my magic after you’re dead!”

“Hah! You have spirit, little one! I can tell you aren’t Aurelian. You smell... different. Did you come for pocket change, or did the girl trick you? Whichever it is, I don’t care, but you would do well to heed my warning. In the end, Aurelians will betray you, just as they did me. It is simply in their nature. Now move. I have no quarrel with you.”

“Like hell I’ll stand down. You fall back, monster! If I don’t get her and my sister back safe, I’ll have to face my father... and he’s a hundred times scarier than you.”

Still standing undaunted to protect the two girls, Claus carried himself proudly in front of the monster. On the inside, however, he was probably terrified.

So, he still has that strong sense of responsibility at such a tender age, Erika thought as she stared at his back. *But...* She glanced down at the wand in her

hands.

It was a Grease wand. The tip was halite, the shaft cherry. The handle was affixed with the skin of a boar. The wick was preserved pig's fat.

What exactly am I supposed to do with this? Erika realized she hadn't received any further instruction. With the intense staring contest going on between Claus and the Zaratan, this was no time to ask.

Yes, at such a critical moment, Erika's confusion only deepened.

2

Claus raised a gruff cry as he charged at the ancient monster. The mass of countless spell cards all around him formed a column as massive as the monster's limbs.

The Zaratan swung its front leg, and Claus willed his cards to guard him like a shield. The moment the beast's sharp claws made contact, the orderly formation of cards deployed a conspicuously large magic circle.

It looked like sparks were flying in their intense clash as residual mana scattered in the air like petals or scales. Claus fell to one knee after being forced back two meters, but he was ultimately unharmed. A majority of his cards were put into his protective magic circle.

Anne took the opportunity to hide in the shadow of the arch dividing the altar from the rest of the temple. Erika took a page out of her book and leapt behind a pillar.

The back-and-forth between magician and monster continued. Claus was forced to stay on the defensive. At times, he would charge a spell card with mana and fire it, but he failed to so much as scratch the monster's armor.

It was amazing enough he managed to hold it off, but his mana was not infinite. The potions in his possession were a limited resource.

His only offensive wand was the Fire Bolt. What's more, it barely had any uses left.

I need to hurry and provide support!

Erika was beginning to panic. Unfortunately, the Grease wand wouldn't inflict any damage, and she highly doubted it would produce enough oil to trip up those massive legs.

She opened her bag and fished out her wands. She hadn't anticipated fighting such a gargantuan creature, so she didn't have many wands she could use in combat. For the time being, she switched out the wands on her belt holster.

Lightning Bolt. Magic Missile. Paralyze. Gust. Castling. Levitate. She kept the Grease wand on hand too, just in case.

As she was swapping out wands, she noticed one that could serve as her trump card.

The Death wand. Its shaft was cypress. The tip was formed from a ring of twelve pyrope garnets. The surface of the staff was polished to a glossy sheen, then carved with the Aurelian word for lament. Its wick was the last breath of a life-form that had died of natural causes, wrapped in myrrh-soaked cloth.

Death magic could only kill living beings smaller than whatever had breathed life into its wick. When preparing for combat against other humans, its maker would often procure the last breath of a horse.

However, this wand was made specifically for dungeon exploration. If it was made to kill ravenous beasts and monsters, then surely it contained the breath of a considerably large creature.

Erika sized up the Zaratan. It was bigger than an elephant.

I only have one shot at this. If the wick is a whale, it's my win. If it's a bear or tiger, we give up and run.

Claus backed off to dodge the Zaratan's claws, and Erika used that opportunity to spring out from the shadows.

"Over here, monster!"

It reacted to her voice, coming to a sudden stop. The moment it saw her, its face contorted in glee.

"Auuuuureliaaaaaan!"

Its scream, thick with malice, sent vibrations coursing through the temple air.

It's supposed to be scary, but it's somewhat... comforting, even. Erika wasn't sure why, but her heart was filled with a peculiar delight.

The monster peeled itself away from Claus as it turned to face Erika, preparing to charge her. In that instant, Erika swung her Death wand.

A dark, inconspicuous black-and-crimson circle materialized at the end of the wand. Three distorted shadows, reminiscent of hands, emerged from it and stretched out toward the monster.

The black hands of death quietly stroked the Zaratan's neck.

"Ahh, yes... Oh, I remember this magic, you cowardly imp! Foolish woman. There is no life-form larger than me anywhere in this world. I am this city itself, the very earth you stand on... I am the one who let you poor vagrants ride upon me as I crossed the sea to these lands."

Erika was shocked. If it was telling the truth, even a Death wand filled with the breath of a whale wouldn't be able to fell it.

The Zaratan kicked off the ground, sprinting at her with speed unbecoming of its bulk. She quickly cast aside the used-up Death wand and pulled out her Paralyze wand.

It's no good! I won't make it in time!

She inadvertently found herself curling up and closing her eyes.

In that instant, she heard a harsh and cacophonous sound, like a car slamming into concrete. When she opened her eyes, she saw that Claus had stepped in front of her to protect her. He'd added another several hundred spell cards to his defensive circle to bear the brunt of the attack.



“Claus!”

“Erika! You, why didn’t you... No, that’s my fault. I didn’t properly explain the plan.”

“Huh? I’m sorry, did I mess up?”

“My attacks are useless, and nothing will happen if I just keep drawing it away, right?”

Erika was finally starting to understand Claus’ strategy. Presumably, as he had the best defense, he would continue to lure the enemy while his comrades provided minimal support so they wouldn’t be considered a threat. That was why Erika was supposed to use Grease support magic.

But isn’t that plan a bit too dangerous for Claus? Unless someone fights this thing off with a decisive blow, the situation will just get worse and worse. If he gets injured, we have no way to treat him.

“I still have a Paralyze and a Lightning Bolt wand. While these may not be enough to beat it, I can create an opening for us to make our escape.”

“No, save your offensive magic. I’ll tell you when to—”

The Zaratan’s claws sliced through the defensive circle. Consecutive attacks had weakened the unity of Claus’ spell cards, and about half of them were stripped off and thrust aside. A massive smile peeked through the rift in the barrier.

“Bwahahaha! All finished with your cheap charade?”

“Erika! Now!”

“On it!”

Claus barely made do with half the cards, but he somehow managed to hold the monster back.

Erika drew the Grease wand. Would it really prove useful in this situation?

No, I need to trust Claus for now.

When she waved it, a white sphere of magic ballooned out from the tip. When it reached the size of a basketball, it gained physical mass, forming a

large bubble of fat.

“Please hit!”

She flicked the wand again to send the ball flying at the Zaratan. The orb bobbed up and down, slowly flying along its course. Just when it reached the tip of the creature’s nose, the Zaratan moved out of the way, looking rather disappointed.

Perhaps it would have worked against a human in heavy armor, but trying to hit such an agile monster with oil magic was a Herculean feat.

A split second later, Claus was blown away, spell cards and all.

“Claus?!”

He tumbled across the floor, coming to a stop at the opposite end of the room.

The Zaratan padded toward Erika at a leisurely pace. It did so quite purposefully, as if it enjoyed the act of cornering its prey.

“Puny humans... Your struggles are futile. That’s right, you always used such petty tricks. It’s all coming back to me now... It was the same when you killed me. That night, when we reached the continent, I was so tired from carrying you that I fell asleep...! You shameless vultures! Did you want the philosopher’s stone so badly you would drop a thousand stars upon me?!”

“The philosopher’s stone?” Erika piped up.

Just as the Seafaring Tribe had sought after it long ago, modern-day alchemists were all in pursuit of this precious artifact. It could change any base metal into gold—a miraculous stone that could transmogrify all of creation into any material one desired.

Going by the events in *Liber Monstrorum*, Zaratan the alchemist should have been murdered by those looking to steal the philosopher’s stone.

“Oh, the stone interests you, does it? I see, you really are the spawn of those insatiable Aurelians. I don’t blame you. But you won’t get it. Your shallow plots are all pointless. The philosopher’s stone is my very soul. You tore through my stomach and gouged out my entrails, but you were never going to find it!”

Erika finally understood. It had been naive of her to think that everything would work out as long as she could save Anne. *This dark monster will never forgive me or my lineage. Its grudges are directed at all the people of Aurelia; its death is a sin we all have to bear. As long as we alchemists continue to seek out the stone, it will continue to condemn us for our crimes.*

“Throw down your wand, girl of Aurelia. I know every spell you can even think to cast my way. You can’t kill me unless you drop a star from the sky. So, what will you do now? You do resemble the girl I grew up with long ago, so I wouldn’t mind offering you mercy. However... that’s only if you can turn on the other two and kill them with your own hands. Betray your comrades as your ancestors betrayed me!”

The monster’s mouth spread nearly wide enough to tear, its rows of fangs—each the size of a tactical knife—weaving into a smile.

“I could never do that!” Erika heard herself shout. Killing the two of them to save herself? She would never agree to such a dastardly transaction.

“I knew it! For someone who speaks nothing but lies, there’s no way you’d admit to wanting to kill someone! But let’s turn this around. You there, girl in hiding! If you leave the Aurelian behind and run with your tail between your legs, I’ll let you and your brother out of here safely! Surely she’s just like her ancestors, only caring about herself. Would abandoning her really wound you?”

The Zaratan spread its front legs wide with the poise and gravitas of a theater actor, its eyes fixed on Anne’s hiding place. What the monster desired was a reenactment of betrayal. A betrayer and a pitiful victim. It demanded an offering, a companion in its misery—to see faith, friendship, and compassion crumble before its eyes.

As Anne glared at the monster, it sensed her hostility and laughed, wholly amused.

“Could you stop trying to seduce my sister?”

With Claus’ voice came the sound of something slicing through the air. Spell cards stuck onto the monster’s knee joints in triple-layered rings. This was binding magic, meant to fasten a target to a point in space.

The triple binding caused the Zaratan to lurch forward, but it still came to a halt.

“If you insist, you’ll have to go through me first,” Claus added.

“You can still move? What foolishness, to cast aside the life I purposefully conserved!”

“I’ll never abandon someone I’ve sworn to protect.”

Claus poured mana from his staff into his cards, slowly walking up to the Zaratan. Here and there, his torn clothes revealed bruises and scrapes. He really was wounded all over, but he’d avoided any major lacerations or broken bones.

After spitting out a bloody lump of saliva, Claus continued, “Besides, what’s wrong with being a fool? Better than being a liar or a traitor, right, monster?”

He gave a fearless smile to intimidate his foe. An inferno blazed in his brilliant blue eyes.

“It’s useless, little one. Your magic cannot pierce me. The same goes for that Aurelian Fire Bolt wand.”

“Don’t look down on my magic, you nameless beast.”

“The blood that flows through them may differ, but humans are all equally foolish. You would stand with Aurelia thrice to hinder my revenge? Do you know who it is you dare to threaten? Do you know how merciful I’ve been? Will it take death for you to realize how fortunate you were?!”

The Zaratan clenched its claws, raising a roar like an earthquake. As it focused its power into its body, cracks spread through the rock-hard substance making up its shell, and its form began to swell like a flexing muscle. It was as if its outer armor was no longer able to withstand the pressure from within.

Bodily fluids resembling black seawater gushed out of the gaps and hardened anew. By repeating this process, the monster swelled larger and larger, as though it was attempting to regain its original form.

Apart from its knees, still held in place by binding magic, the Zaratan’s legs had doubled in thickness. Even its restrained limbs threatened to break free. The magic circle facilitating the seal was bent out of shape.

Then the magic finally burst, its mana spilling out in fine grains of light.

“Claus, the restraining magic fell apart!”

“It’s still too soon, but... Ugh! Change of plans!”

Claus wildly swung his staff to control the flight path of countless spell cards, which stuck fast to every nook and cranny of the Zaratan’s body.

“If a normal Fire Bolt’s no good, then how about I turn up the heat?!”

He had secretly been using his spell cards to collect the spilled grease the monster had dodged earlier. Now aiming straight at the fat-spattered monster, Claus unleashed an arrow of flame from the wand in his hand.

As the compressed inferno hit its mark, the grease immediately caught fire. A pillar of flame rose several times higher than the Zaratan itself, illuminating the dim labyrinth as though it were midday.

“No way...”

Claus’ mutter was answered by a low chuckle.

“What is it, little one? After talking so tough, that’s all you can do? You couldn’t kill a fly with a flame that weak.”

Its body enveloped by the fierce blaze, the Zaratan calmly walked toward Erika. There was nothing holding it back now. It held out its two enlarged forelimbs and slowly brought them together.

In accordance with these movements, the flames engulfing the Zaratan shrunk, sucked away into the soles of its feet. By the time its front claws were touching, the fire had dissipated entirely.

“Grr...! I’ll just bind you again!”

“Hah! I won’t fall for the same trick twice!”

The Zaratan batted the cards away before they could position themselves, closing the distance one step at a time. Its strength had definitely increased with its size. This time, even Claus might not be able to hold it in place.

This is bad, Erika thought as she swiftly used the Lightning Bolt wand. Before the bolt of electricity from its tip could hit the Zaratan, the monster opened its

mouth and let loose a familiar-looking stream of magical flames.

Fire and lightning met head-on, the structures of the two spells interfering with and offsetting one another. Both spells soon cleared the air, and the Zaratan stood unhindered and unharmed.

“Fire magic? How?”

“Oh no... It can't be!”

Erika and Claus gaped at the monster.

“You’ve noticed far too late! Now, be good and get crushed like the vermin you are!”

A massive forelimb, thicker than a number of trees bound together, loomed over their heads. Claus leapt in front of Erika, his arms outstretched to protect her.

The next moment, a single streak of light crossed her field of vision. A fine yet powerful ray collided with the Zaratan's left knee. The monster's thick scales crumbled as the beam pierced all the way to the other side.

After a moment of silence, the hole opened by the light burst into pale blue flames. With its knee joint destroyed from the inside, the Zaratan missed its next step.

“Claus! Erika! Run!”

“Nice work, Anne!”

Claus dragged Erika by the hand out of the inner sanctum. Anne awaited them there, her staff at the ready and sweat on her brow.

Along the way, they crossed paths with a vial Anne had tossed through the air: the bottle of obscuring mist. Its glass casing shattered against the monster's scales, scattering a thick, white mist. The mist spread further and further until it had cloaked the entire inner sanctum of the temple.

“What took you so long? We almost died back there.”

“Just be glad I fired the spell at all.”

“You concentrated too much mana into it. It would have still gone through if it

was a little weaker.”

“For crying out loud, Claus! Less yapping, more running!”

Only Erika failed to grasp the situation. She silently listened to the Hafan siblings’ exchange while sprinting with all her might.

“For starters, Claus, you could have at least given me an explanation.”

“What?!” cried Erika. “He didn’t tell you anything either?”

“Yeah, my bad. We didn’t really have the time.”

“I would’ve understood if you’d just told me you were going to save Erika and get out! When you went toe-to-toe with that monster, I was sure you had lost your mind.”

“Anne, that kinda stings...”

“I for one just thought it was just Claus doing Claus things.”

“What exactly do you people think I am?”

Erika and Anne averted their eyes.

“Well, Claus, you’re a very brave and audacious person,” said Erika.

“Yes, you’ve got courage, and... courage... A lot of courage, let’s go with that.”

“Honestly, you two—”

Whatever he was going to say was cut off by a thunderous roar from behind. The three of them turned to see that the wall separating the inner sanctum from the rest of the temple had collapsed. The beast burst out from the ocher haze of dust and magical mist.

Having lost a leg, the Zaratan slammed both its forelimbs against the ground, charging forward with a hobbling gait.

“It’s already up and running?! Come on, hurry!”

They breezed through the temple and scampered into a narrow corridor at one end. Not a second later, the passage shook from a massive impact. Dust sprang from every surface to fill the cramped space. It seemed the Zaratan wouldn’t be able to follow them due to its size.

Something massive reached through the nearly collapsed entryway, and the tip of Erika's nose was grazed by a claw as sharp and deadly as an executioner's ax.

"Whoa!"

"Erika, keep moving! We need to go deeper!"

"You have to move, Erika! Get out of its reach!"

While Erika cowered in fear, Claus and Anne pulled her out of harm's way. The Zaratan's claws swung wildly right before their eyes. The monster was groping around for them, scraping again and again at the floors and walls. Once it realized its prey wasn't within reach, it pulled back its foot and placed its eye against the corridor. An empty eye socket, pitch-black like a bottomless pit.

"Hate you... hate you, hate you, hate, hate, hate, hate, hatehatehatehatehatehatehatehatehatehatehatehatehatehatehatehateHATEHATEHATEHATE Cowardly Aurelian... Brats who take her side... I won't forgive any of you. I'll make you my playthings until you beg me to kill you..."

With those ominous words, the Zaratan withdrew its face and used its claws to destroy the entryway. The hard stone was punctured as easily as styrofoam by the monster's strength, which exceeded human understanding.

"Eep!"

"Aaah!"

"Move! Talk later! Just run!" Claus barked, and Erika and Anne ran as fast as they could.

I was sure I was dead this time.

With so many shocking situations happening one after another, Erika's mind had come to a near-complete stop, but she had enough sense to devote her entire being to placing one foot in front of the other.

3

The three children ran for some time before they stopped hearing the

destructive sounds of the Zaratan behind them. They had traversed numerous crossroads, and by now the temple had to be a considerable distance behind them. Granted, they were completely lost, but this was hardly a problem; they intended to use the Wall-Phase scroll and the Levitate wand to escape. Still, the occasional rumble told them that the Zaratan was still hot on their heels.

Once they had all calmed down a bit, Claus piped, “If I really must explain, I was buying time. When fighting a large monster, you often can’t outrun it because of the length of its stride. No matter how slow an opponent may look, you can never make light of them. That’s why I stood in front to buy time, since I have the best defense.”

“Its charge was frighteningly fast. I didn’t think it would close the gap between us that quickly...” Anne conceded.

“Yeah, exactly. Even if we were at a safe distance, it would be too dangerous to face that thing in a place with few obstacles.”

“I mean, how is it going that fast while missing a leg?” Anne grumbled.

Erika recalled the terror she’d just felt. She knew the human body froze when it was possessed by fear. “Why did you permit Anne to attack?” she asked Claus. “You told me not to.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice.”

“Erika, concentrating mana is my specialty. As long as I have the time, I can use very powerful magic.” Anne timidly pressed a hand to her chest as she spoke.

Erika recalled that the capabilities of Hafan magicians were greatly influenced by their personal traits.

“By charging a spell with extra mana, Anne can fire off stronger magic than the average magician.”

“But it takes time to do it, and I’m no good with spells that have a wide area of effect.”

“Point is, she’s good at precision work, so she’s perfect for sniping.”

In exchange for being bad at spells that worked over too large an area, Anne

was good at concentrating her mana. This allowed her to use precise, compact magic, which was how she had been able to penetrate the Zaratan's body when the wand and even Claus' spell cards couldn't.

"Still, you don't usually make an attack-magic novice use something as destructive as Scorching Ray, brother."

"Better than risking some low-output attack that could fail to pierce him, right?"

"Wait, are you incapable of casting Scorching Ray, Claus?" Erika asked. She'd assumed Claus was the sort who could wield any type of magic.

"My hands were full with the protective circle. If I hadn't deployed my spell cards at max output, I would've lost to that monster's brute force."

"Ah, so that's it."

Claus had bought them time with his defenses while Erika had supported him with the Grease wand. Then, Claus had attacked with Fire Bolt, and Anne had sniped the monster with Scorching Ray, giving the three of them the chance to run.

Erika finally understood Claus' plan.

"Claus, let's hurry and use the Wall-Phase scroll to escape," Anne suggested.

"I'm not so sure about that," he replied. "You both saw that monster's ability, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Huh? What sort of ability?" Erika asked, feeling left in the dark. She understood that the monster was enigmatic, but she didn't have a grasp on its abilities.

Just what could it be? She waited for Claus to explain.

"Your Glámr-Sight wore off? Come to think of it, the Glámr-Sight in your wands is very short-lived."

"Yes, I didn't have time to recast it in battle."

"Well, you saw how my magic didn't work on it, right?"

“Yep, that part I got.”

“When the flames were sucked into its feet, the monster seemed to be using spatial manipulation. That made me suspicious, but it really clicked when it spat out fire. That was Fire Bolt magic. What’s more, the creator was listed as Eduard Aurelia.”

If Eduard had created that magic, then what sort of trickery was this? Erika had a very bad feeling about it.

“In other words, that monster absorbs magic and then shoots it back out?”

“Yeah. Unfortunately.” Claus nodded.

What a troublesome ability. The Zaratan’s sturdy defenses were already formidable, but on top of that, magic didn’t work against it. Still, something seemed off to Erika. If it absorbed magic, how had they managed to damage it at all?

“Then why didn’t it absorb Anne’s Scorching Ray?”

“I’m assuming it isn’t an automatic ability. It has to react to the attack, manually take it in, and then fire it. That’s why a surprise attack was effective.”

“So preparation is important... It’s the same for us alchemists. How very fitting for a monster of these ruins.”

This meant sniping wouldn’t work again. If the monster anticipated another one of these attacks, it could absorb it the next time around and gain a powerful spell to use against them. Their foe was truly terrifying.

“But why does that mean we can’t use the Wall-Phase scroll?”

“As long as that thing is still on our tail, we can’t use it willy-nilly. In the one-in-a-million chance we come into contact with it while Wall-Phase is active, we’ll probably burn to death.”

“Huh?!”

“That monster still has one of my Fire Bolts left. There’s probably an inferno blazing inside it, waiting to be fired.”

So it was the same as the acid-hydrogel golem. If they passed through an

object storing a flame, they would die.

“Then what should we do, Claus?”

“I’ll put up my protective circle to prevent contact. Meanwhile, Anne, you cast Wall-Phase on all of us.”

Their ears told them that the monster was always lurking close by. Claus would have to protect them to make sure they never passed through its body while the scroll’s spell was in effect. As long as they could do that, they had a good chance of escape.

“You want me to do it?”

“Erika can’t use a magician’s scroll, right? My hands will be full with the circle.”

“I’m so sorry, you two...”

“O-Oh, no! It’s nothing you have to apologize for.”

Erika felt overly apologetic. Using a magician’s scroll required a certain level of vocabulary and understanding of mana manipulation, neither of which Erika could help with.

“For starters, let’s find a medium-sized room or a dead end somewhere. I can’t defend against that thing from all directions.”

“But Claus, if that monster approaches in liquid form, can’t it attack from anywhere?”

“No, it needs a large, open space to form its outer shell. If I set my cards to erect an anti-undead circle around the whole room, it won’t be able to get in through the cracks and gaps in the stone.”

This is all starting to feel like one of those horror movies where a house is haunted by a vengeful ghost. Come to think of it, there really is an evil spirit lurking in these ruins...

The evil spirit wasn’t a ghost, though; it was a giant monster, which made her think she was in more of a monster movie than a horror film.

“By the way, why do you know so much about its capabilities, Claus?”

“She’s right. You shouldn’t be able to tell that much from Glámr-Sight alone.”

“Yeah. Truth be told, I tried sealing part of it.”

Claus held up a light-brown glass vial, which contained a dubiously wriggling, black liquid.

This is a part of it? Erika stared intently at the squirming substance.

“I collected it when Anne blew off its leg. That monster’s innards have a similar structure to a wraith’s, so I wanted to see if sealing magic that works on wraiths would be effective.”

“I’m surprised you had the time for that,” said Anne.

Erika inaudibly lauded Claus’ sheer pluck for handling a bottle containing any part of that abomination. No normal person would ever want to touch something so sinister, vial or not.

“Its outer shell is made from the corpses that fell from the eighth floor. The seal won’t work from the outside.”

“So you can only seal it in a bottle when it’s in liquid form.”

“That’s right. If you want to reseal it, you have to destroy its outer layer first. We need to pass this information on to Duke Aurelia.”

The monster would surely give chase even if they managed to make it out safe and sound. Then it wouldn’t just be Erika—the other people of Aurelia would be in danger. Naturally, House Aurelia would stand at the vanguard of the battle.

During that time, this small vial containing a sample of the monster would definitely prove useful.

All of a sudden, Anne glared harshly at her brother.

“Claus... What do you think about the monster’s ability to accurately track us no matter how far we go?”

“No way! It’s... I-I-It’s because of this?!” Claus turned pale as he gawked at the vial.

Apparently, the Zaratan could detect this detached portion and use it as a

marker. Alternatively, this portion might have been calling out to the creature's main body.

"Oh, I see. So that's what it's chasing."

Erika finally understood. No matter how much of a monster the Zaratan was, it was strange for it to keep chasing what it couldn't see.

"Claus!" Anne shouted before he could drop the vial. "Keep a good grip on it! Who knows what will happen if that breaks!"

"What do I do, Erika?"

In a panic, Claus passed the bottle off to Erika. And Erika, lost in thought, inadvertently accepted it.

"Why are you giving it to me? Don't just hand it over because you don't want to deal with it!"

With the small vial containing a monster in her hands, Erika was regretting from the depths of her heart that she had ever set foot in the Seafarer's Ruins.



Erika stood at the crossroads, waving her Mage Hand wand. Five invisible fingers gripped the bottle containing a portion of the Zaratan, floating it down the dark corridor.

The bottle was laced with Anne's alarm magic. If the monster broke it, the clapperless bell Anne carried would make a sound to alert them.

"That should buy us some time."

"Pretty clever of you. I guess your mind doesn't fall short of your looks."

"Oh dear, you must mean I have villainous thoughts running behind my villainess face. Villainous indeed."

"Err, no, that wasn't what I meant at all..." Erika's teasing had Claus terribly flustered.

"If we don't get out of here fast, buying time will have been pointless." Anne delivered a kick to urge Claus forward. "Still, I've lost my sense of which direction is which."

“Even if my Find the Path cantrip doesn’t cost much mana, this floor drains mana like all the others. I can’t use it that frequently.”

Fatigue had piled on thick for Claus and Anne, especially when compared to Erika. These ruins were evidently too harsh on magicians.

“I’m worried we’ll do a full circle and run straight into it,” Erika said. “Do you have a plan for when that happens, Claus?”

“Don’t worry. The passages are narrow, so we’ll know if we’re approaching it by the sound of it digging through the walls.”

“The monster should head to the bottle before it comes for us. We’ll be safe until the bell rings.”

At that moment, they heard the booming of a blustorous bellow as the ground rumbled beneath them. The children reflexively readied themselves, but they quickly realized that this wasn’t the sound of the Zaratan digging.

It was the grating of grinding gears and the shrill scraping of stone against stone.

“That’s the sound of the maze shifting... right?” Erika asked cautiously. “For a second, I thought the monster was back.”

“Yeah,” Claus grunted.

“Come to think of it, the maze is still operating normally.”

The labyrinth had continued to move even after they had given the Zaratan the slip. Erika knew it would eventually lead to something unpleasant. The moving maze had caused them so much trouble along the way; she had a vague sense that nothing good would ever come of it.

Straight ahead, the path became a dead end, but halfway down the corridor was a heavy metal door.

“Let’s hope that the next room is a manageable size.”

“We won’t know until we see it.”

When Claus opened the door, it revealed a considerably vast room.

We’ll have to get searching again, Erika thought as she was struck by the

weight of their wasted efforts.

That being the case, the junction behind them was where they'd sent the bottle to buy time. The plan would be ruined if they turned around.

"Let's hope there's another door in here."

Erika took a look around the room. She felt there was something terribly familiar about it.

"Wait! This one's bad. Erika! Anne! Get out n—"

Decorative walls and pillars, a floor scattered with rubble, and a wide-open ceiling—this was the temple where the Zaratan had been sealed. They had entered from one of the transepts, so it had taken her a moment to connect the dots.

Just as they tried to retreat, something fell in front of the door, blocking their way out.

Solid black scales, eyes as empty as the abyss, claws so sharp they could slice through bedrock like butter. Its wounded leg already healed, the monster Zaratan now stood before them in perfect condition.

Erika understood that the monster had baited them. Had it climbed up the wall to launch an ambush? It was surprisingly nimble for its large frame.

"I've grown weary of waiting, humans."

"What... What did you do?!"

"It was no coincidence. I ushered you here personally using the mechanisms that alter the maze. We are inside my body. I know this construction better than anyone."

The Zaratan gestured to where the wall had been destroyed, exposing the gears within. By directly turning the gears, it had personally altered their course.

"Brother, do you have another Scorching Ray scroll?"

"If only. But that monster won't drop its guard again. No matter what magic we send its way, it'll absorb it for sure next time."

“Then what can we do?”

“I don’t know. We were so close...” Claus let out a bitter groan.

Erika shared his exact sentiment. *After coming so far, being cornered like this is just cruel.* She contemplated whether they had another means of escape, but she ultimately drew a blank.

“Anne, Erika! Its charge is dangerous! Split up and find cover!”

Claus scattered all of his remaining spell cards, deploying his protective circle at maximum output. He raced straight toward the monster without a moment of hesitation. Erika and Anne went separate directions, as instructed, each finding their own thick pillar to hide behind.

But the air froze over as Claus was sent flying by a single blow from the monster. Its forelimbs were thicker, longer, and more sinister-looking than the last time Erika had seen them. Evidently, it had transformed again.

“I’ve grown tired of playing with children. Now, how should I kill you? Any ideas, daughter of vultures? Oh, I’ve got it. Aurelian, I’ll start by killing the other two right in front of your eyes. A special gift just for you.” The Zaratan’s voice was filled with glee.

“What?!”

“Bwahahaha, how wonderful. Your pain is my blessing! Now, may your soul taste the darkest depths of loneliness and despair! You shall offer your soul and sweet flesh to me!”

The beast chirped, all at once laughing with joy, singing a song, and raising a scream.

“I’ll start with the smallest, most powerless, yet strongest one among you. The one who inflicted the greatest wound upon me. I’ll snuff out your hope!”

With only two swings of its weighty forelimbs, the Zaratan pulverized the pillar Anne was hiding behind. Though she cowered in fear, Anne diligently kept the tip of her staff trained on the beast. Little Anne, the youngest among them, was determined not to give up.

“Come at me, monster! The one you’re really afraid of is me, not Anne! If you

want to kill my sister, you'll have to go through me first!"

Claus wavered on his feet, covered in wounds. His attempt at intimidation was accompanied by a blast from his spell cards, but the Zaratan ignored him entirely.

"Mwahahaha! I can sense it, little girl! I smell your strong and noble soul! Indeed, you shall be second only to the Aurelian in flavor."

The airspace around the Zaratan's body bent and warped.

"Stop!" Claus' rending cry pulled at Erika's heart.

Several sinister black shadows emerged from the areas warped by spatial magic. The monster was about to release the magic stored in its body, and if that wasn't bad enough, the spell it had chosen was Death. If Anne, the smallest among them, were to take it on, there was no doubt she would die.

Was Anne unable to escape her fated death? Erika's mind replayed the memories of the brief time she had spent with Anne thus far. The tips of her fingers nudged a certain wand out of its holster.

Not a chance! No way I'll let that happen! The world's already unreasonable enough! Why should I let such a small child die before everyone else?

Just as the black hands were reaching out to take young Anne, Erika swung the Castling wand without thinking of the consequences.

4

The Castling spell succeeded. Erika was moved to Anne's position, and Anne was deposited at Erika's former location. The circles deployed at their feet had swapped them in the blink of an eye.

As Erika looked up, she saw the Zaratan, a beast hellbent on revenge, towering before her. Countless black hands were stretching toward her, like the grotesque petals of a sinister flower.

This spell had been absorbed from the Death wand, then amplified by the power of the philosopher's stone. It was now a hex of instant death.

The arms had already surrounded her, leaving not a gap between them. Every one of them was locked on, ready to take hold. It was too late to avoid them, too late to do anything at all.

In the corner of her eye, she could see Claus and Anne watching over her with looks of anguish on their faces. But the Zaratan's grudges were directed solely at the Seafaring Tribe and their descendant, Erika. The Hafan siblings were unrelated to its revenge.

Run away. Please, you have to get out safely!

Instead of resisting, Erika prayed. The reapers' hands gently stroked her without causing her pain or torment. She closed her eyes and accepted the death they would bring.

Having lost all its strength, Erika's petite body slowly fell forward. Her mind was filled not with hatred or regret but with thoughts of her family in this world.

Eduard, Father, forgive me for leaving before you. Thank you for always being so kind to me. I'll be joining Mother now.

Thinking back on it, Erika felt that her mere eight years of life had been very fulfilling. She felt grateful to have been able to live without a care in the world; it was something she never could've pulled off in her past life.

If she were to be reborn again, she wanted to be a blade of grass swaying in a pasture or an emperor penguin. But as such carefree thoughts floated through her mind, Erika realized something was off.

Huh? Am I not dead yet?

Unlike the merciful curse the trapped chest had placed on her, Death magic was meant to promptly bring about her demise. It would have made sense if she'd lost consciousness ages ago. What's more, it was around the right time for her body to hit the floor, but she was still in the air.

Knowing something must have gone awry, Erika cautiously opened her eyes.

The first things she saw were her trademark blonde ringlets. Far from the pretty, maintained curls she was used to, they were in considerable disarray

from intense movement. She could clearly make out the difference. At the moment, her hair was poised like it was blowing in the wind, yet it was frozen in place.

No, it wasn't only her hair; the blue ribbon she had bound it with was also suspended in the air. So, too, was the Castling wand that had left her hand, the kicked-up dust, the falling debris of the pillar the Zaratan had destroyed, and even the Zaratan itself.

Is this where my life is supposed to flash before my eyes...?

But it wasn't as if *everything* had frozen. Only a four-or five-meter radius was locked in place. This couldn't possibly be the world slowing down in her last few seconds of life.

An innumerable amount of small objects circled the suspended space at breakneck speed, letting off a silver glimmer as they flew.

Are those spell cards?

The cards flew wildly to and fro, deploying a silver magic circle. The barrier they formed seemed to slow the flow of time.

But... that's strange.

Erika couldn't follow. Just like spatial magic, time magic was one of the most powerful magics in the world. Neither Claus nor Anne should have been able to use it.

His head hung in despair, Claus slowly trudged forward. He artlessly entered the barrier as if it were the simplest thing in the world. The altered flow of time didn't seem to affect him.

"L...itt...le... one... Wh...at... di...d... y...ou..."

"Shut up."

The Zaratan was interrupted by a dark voice, thick with hatred. It was hard to believe that this cold, angry voice had come from a ten-year-old boy.

"How dare you."

Claus swung his fist, and something collided with the Zaratan. The resulting

clank made it sound as if it had been struck by a heavy, metal hammer or a thick, metal plate.

Small cracks spread across the monster's natural armor where it had taken the blow.

"How dare you."

The boy swung his fist again. Erika saw it this time: a single spell card flew out from the protective circle he still had deployed. The monster's shell received a blow to the same spot as before, this time shattering and ejecting the black liquid within. Fragments of scales and drops of liquid were suspended in the air like everything else.

Claus lifted his face. It was a solid, icy mask that bore no expression. His eyes were as blue and clear as a perfectly transparent sapphire. A single teardrop spilled down his cheek.

"How dare you," he repeated again.

Another spell card struck the monster, and a little more of the Zaratan's body crumbled away. The protective circle had undergone gradual tweaks to be more efficient at defending against the monster. But even if it was effective, it was still just defensive magic. Sending it at an enemy shouldn't yield any significant damage.

Erika was shocked to realize Claus was attacking with nothing more than pure kinetic energy. He was imbuing the cards with unfathomable levels of acceleration. And within a barrier where time was slowed, the Zaratan had no means to oppose him.

"Do...n't... tell... me... you... used... ti...me..."

The Zaratan was unable to dodge or defend itself. It could regenerate, or even alter the properties of its armor to resist this new type of attack, but it just wouldn't happen fast enough. Even if it wanted to absorb the attacks, the disparity between time for its body and mind made such a delicate process impossible.

"How dare you."

Each time Claus thrust a spell card at the monster, the Zaratan's body crumbled, exposing more of the black liquid that constituted its real body.

It was a one-sided assault. The spell cards themselves were nothing more than small scraps of paper, yet they bombarded the monster as though they were lumps of iron.

He swung. It crumbled.

He swung. It crumbled.

He swung. It crumbled.

He swung. It crumbled.

As if he were a machine made solely for that purpose, Claus kept hammering the Zaratan with his rage in silence.

It wasn't long before all his spell cards were out in the air. Claus lifted up his staff and took an offensive stance. Another tear fell from his clear blue eyes.

Erika felt that tear was terribly beautiful.



“How dare you... How dare you kill... my friend...”

He struck the bottom of his staff against the stone floor. Taking that as their signal, the countless cards that had once formed his protective circle flew at the Zaratan all at once.

Claus’ magic was like a silver tornado. Contrary to its beauty, the gale annihilated anything it came into contact with. The Zaratan’s limbs were already tattered, and now it was dismantled to such a degree that not a vestige remained of its initial form. Soon, it was nothing more than suspended black liquid surrounded by spell cards.

“I’ll never forgive you.”

The encirclement of spell cards slowly contracted, letting off a prismatic array as they compressed the Zaratan within.

“Rooooaaaar...! W...hy... you... Le...t... go... I... still...!” Zaratan’s final cry reverberated throughout the room. It was not expressing resentment toward Erika or Claus; it was simply a cry of anguish. A deep portion of Erika’s heart resonated and shook with the monster’s scream.

Ultimately, the ball of spell cards sealing the Zaratan shrank down to the size of a tennis ball. A little late, Erika realized Claus had used not only time magic but also spatial magic.

Hafan magic was hindered by an immature body and an unstable mind. However, strong emotions could amplify a spell’s strength enough to overturn any disadvantage.

Erika felt a tiny swell of happiness. She never could’ve imagined Claus would be this angry over her death.

Claus took out an empty bottle and began chanting a spell in a singsong voice. What remained of the ancient monster was sucked into the small vial, spell cards and all. Now this lonely beast would slumber once more.

The spell he sang sounded somewhat like an elegy to Erika.

“Erika, I... You were...”

Once he had finished the sealing spell, Claus powerlessly crumpled down on

the spot. Concurrently, the frozen time snapped back into motion.

Erika fell onto the floor, which was covered in rubble. Her delicate back smacked into a rather large fragment.

“That smaaaaarts!” Erika yelped without romance or fanfare as she writhed around in desperate search of flat ground.

Claus’ body twitched, and he trembled as he slowly turned toward her.

“Huh?” His eyes opened wide when he saw Erika’s unsightly display of agony.

Noticing Claus’ stare, Erika picked herself up. Along the way, she smiled as wide as she could to inform him that she was perfectly fine.

Color and expression slowly returned to Claus’ face.

Huh... He looks pretty surprised.

The emotions she could read on his face went round and round like the patterns of a turning kaleidoscope—anger, joy, embarrassment, suppressed tears of relief. After he wiped at his face, something seemed to dawn on him, and his brow furrowed.

No, that’s not it. He’s angry, I knew it. He’s really, really angry. That’s not good. Where should I run?

Just as Erika was about to retreat, Anne raced over and embraced her.

“Erika! I’m glad you’re alright!”

“Yes, I’m fine now.”

Anne’s face was frigid from her extreme anxiety. Erika patted her on the back as gently as she could. Though Claus was still scowling, it seemed he had lost the better—and more colorful—part of his vocabulary in front of his sister.

Can I play it off? Erika wondered. But unfortunately, Anne abruptly returned to her senses and backed off with a bashful look.

Ahh, wait, Anne, stay a bit! Please, protect me from your brother!

Erika barely kept the words from spilling out of her mouth.

“You... Why did you do something so dangerous?”

“I don’t really know. I wonder why.”

When Erika played dumb with an innocent look on her face, Claus went scarlet.

“If you’re alive, then say something! You caused me to misunderstand, did you not?!”

“Even if she wanted to speak, Erika was in your delay barrier, wasn’t she?”

“Ngh...!”

Anne’s comment had him at a loss for words.

“Hey, I’m alive and well, so could you be a little happier?” Erika timidly pointed out.

Claus clenched his shaking fists with a sulky look on his face. Unlike a moment ago, his appearance befitted his age perfectly and came with its share of cuteness. The sight of him caused just a smidgen of mischief to bud in Erika’s heart.

“What’s that?! Why, Claus, I’d like to think not, but...”

“Wh-What is it?”

“Do you really want me dead that badly?”

“Oh... Brother, you’re the worst...” Anne played along with Erika’s theatrics.

“Wrong! Of course I don’t!” Claus refuted, turning redder by the minute. He was responding with such earnestness, Erika immediately regretted teasing him. Only now did it occur to her that she’d done it because she was too embarrassed to properly thank him.

It wouldn’t get across if she didn’t say it outright, so she had to be clear.

“Claus.”

“What is it this time?!”

“Thank you for saving me.”

“Oh, uh, right.”

“Also, thanks for getting angry for my sake, as a friend.”

Erika imparted her heartfelt gratitude. Claus averted his eyes from her in bashful irritation.

“Well, so be it. As long as you’re safe, then all is well. I, you see, Erika, I—”

“Aha!” Erika suddenly shouted while Claus grappled to find the right words.

“What is it?” he asked.

“What’s wrong, Erika?” added Anne.

“Could it be that the Death spell lost out against my brother’s merciful death curse?”

That must’ve been why she hadn’t died instantly. The curse of merciful death had already fated her to die in a few hours. This contradicted the instant death that the Death spell would’ve brought upon her.

As a result of these two contrary fates colliding, the more-powerful merciful death must have triumphed.

Fortune and misfortune are intertwined—or perhaps, inscrutable are the ways of heaven. Nice going, Eduard.

Erika was genuinely impressed. Not just anyone could make such a powerful death trap. She worried whether or not anyone aside from Eduard would be able to dispel this fearsome curse, but mulling it over down here wouldn’t amount to anything.

“Yeah, that’s all I can think of. I noticed the conflict the moment I realized you were alive.”

“You’re pretty smart, Claus. I only realized it just now.”

“Then... that wasn’t your plan when you used Castling?”

“No, not at all. It completely slipped my mind.”

“You did that with the intention of throwing your life away?”

“Yes. I was going with the flow, I suppose, and carelessly went and did it.” Erika’s tone was indifferent, as if it were someone else’s business.

That’s just about what you should expect from someone as shallow as me. She chuckled to herself.

“Don’t throw your life away on the spot like that! Oh, you won’t hear the end of this! Not from me!”

“But you’re the one who kept putting your life on the line to protect us,” Erika said with all seriousness, looking straight at Claus.

“Erk! Y-You have a point... But still, I can’t *believe* you!”

“Claus! I’ll never forgive you if you keep saying such rude things to Erika!” Anne cried, and the two of them immediately got into a sibling quarrel.

Erika smoothly and quietly made her escape so as not to instigate them any further.

These two actually get along pretty well, she thought as she enjoyed their exchange from afar.



Erika, Claus, and Anne escaped the Seafarer’s Ruins in one piece. All it took was some earnest swings of the Levitate wand while the Wall-Phase scroll was active.

They were back in the Spring Palace before midnight. Erika estimated it had been roughly four hours since they had first entered the ruins. It had felt like much, much longer.

To Erika, these were the longest, most drawn-out four hours she had ever experienced, past life included.

Claus dispelled his phantasmal maze, allowing Erika to go to her father. She deliberated a bit, wondering how honest she should be, and ended up telling him only that she had fallen for a trapped storage chest set by Eduard in the Seafarer’s Ruins.

She didn’t have nearly enough courage to tell him they had reached the bottom floor or that they had undone the seal on an ancient monster, let alone that they had risked their lives to reseal it.

“I’m so sorry, Father.” Erika’s apology was heartfelt. She kept a low posture, making sure to show she was deeply regretting her actions and reflecting on them; this was a very Japanese negotiation tactic she had picked up in her past

life. At that moment, Claus stepped in to cover for her.

“It’s all my fault. I dragged her into it. Erika didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Claus, you have my thanks for protecting Erika. She returned unharmed from those ruins because you were with her, correct?”

“No, that’s not it. I was the one who—”

“Yes, that’s right, Father. Claus did his best to keep me safe.” She didn’t want him to complicate things, and she was genuinely thankful that he’d protected her.

“Very good. You see, Claus, Erika is my treasure; nothing in the world can replace her. I promise to repay this debt to you someday. As a father and as Duke Aurelia.” The seasoned noble was expressing the utmost respect to a boy more than thirty years his junior.

Claus still looked like he wanted to say something, but he didn’t dwell on it.

Erika’s father sent Claus and Anne out to where the Duke and Duchess of Hafan were waiting for them.

“Erika...”

“Yes?”

Without another word, Duke Aurelia locked her in a warm and gentle embrace.

To Erika, this made her feel far more guilty than if he had actually scolded her. There were people who would be saddened if she treated her life so cheaply. She was finally beginning to open her eyes to something so obvious.



“I can finally get some sleep.”

Duke Aurelia successfully dispelled the curse two hours after she had returned to the palace. In the midst of the process, Claus anxiously came to check on her again and again. In the end, he even escorted her back to her room.

What a conscientious person, Erika thought with a smile.

She threw aside the leather bag she'd borrowed from Eduard, stripped off her outfit, and collapsed onto the bed.

Ah, I'm finished. I'm not moving a single step! she proclaimed in her heart as she sunk beneath the covers. She wasn't going to go tomb raiding again. Dungeon crawling could stay in video games, where it belonged.

As she rolled from side to side, her hand brushed against something hard. She picked it up to find that it was a single vial. She'd asked Claus to give it to her on the way back.

"Looks like I still have one more job to do."

She crawled out of the bed with hollow eyes and made for her workbench. Digging through every nook and cranny chock-full of alchemical reagents, she finally managed to find what she was looking for.

Can I put my prior knowledge to good use?

She mapped out the process in her head as she got the tools and materials in order. This was going to be time-consuming work; perhaps she would be up all night. She turned back toward the bed, yearning in her eyes.

"Ahh, my beloved blankets..."

Shaking off her lingering attachment, she concentrated on the spoils of war arranged on the table.

Chapter 4: The Promised Land

“Alright, Claus. Keep a good hold of those flowers.”

Erika snipped off another light-pink rose with the pruning shears and handed it to Claus, who was off to one side arranging the roses into a bouquet.

Claus had gotten quite an earful from his parents the night before, and there were bags under his eyes. What’s more, while he hadn’t suffered any serious injuries, he was still covered in scrapes and bruises. There were bandages on his cheeks and brow, making him look almost like a protagonist from a shounen manga.

Is his skin otherwise perfectly clear because of his youth, or is that one of the special perks of being a pretty boy? Erika wondered.

Naturally, her own skin was in great condition. She rarely exercised, yet she wasn’t feeling any muscle pains. Erika had to thank her mother for giving birth to such a robust girl.

“Hehe, you heard her, Claus. You have to listen to me today.”

As promised, the three of them were strolling through the rose garden of the Spring Palace. The gardeners watched endearingly as Anne frolicked to and fro. She was followed by Erika with the pruning shears and Claus with his arms full of flowers. It was as if Anne were a princess and the other two her attendants.

Erika’s eyes were soaked in the green of spring, and Claus seemed to be zoning out as well.

Oh, a comrade in arms, Erika thought as she looked at Claus. Their eyes met.

“Erika, were you up all night too?”

“Yes, I still had a few things to take care of. Nice job on surviving the lecture.”

“Hardly,” Claus muttered with lifeless eyes.

Oh, should I have said something more refined? “My condolences,” maybe?

Erika tried coming up with an eloquent Japanese phrase to comfort him, but the truth of the matter was that they were conversing in the language of the present world. This world's language tended to be rather wishy-washy when it came to formal and informal speech, so it wasn't that strict.

"The lectures, or rather my father's teachings, aren't over yet. I'm just taking a breather."

"Really?"

"After that, it's Mother's turn."

"Good luck. I know you'll pull through." Erika offered a wry smile.

House Hafan seemed to be quite strict, but it was probably born of love and genuine concern.

"Look, brother, those roses over there are so beautiful!"

"Fine, go for it. But just two more, okay?"

"Why, Claus! If you're not repentant enough, I can always tell Mother and Father about it."

"Ngh... Let's get to work, Erika! We'll prune the entire rose garden!"

"You're overreacting!"

"Yes, yes. You can have as many flowers as you want."

Anne seemed to be wholeheartedly enjoying herself. While Claus tagged along with a somber look on his face, he sincerely seemed relieved that she was alright.

I'm glad they get along. Erika smiled serenely. *And finally, finally, that's one of my death flags gone and done with.*

She felt that a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. The flag had been a stubborn one, but now that it had been eliminated, she could breathe a sigh of relief. Having overcome that hurdle, Erika felt completely drained. On top of that, she was terribly sleep-deprived, which had transformed her into an autonomous, flower-pruning doll that could explain the flowers' features on demand.

I can zone out this much and still not die! This is pure bliss. She keenly savored the taste of her good fortune.

“Erika, dearest, what’s that yellow flower?”

“That would be a Lady Banks’ rose, native to the southern continent.”

“Wonderful! I’m going to get a closer look!”

“Yes, of course. Go ahead, Anne.”

Ever since the incident, Anne had begun calling Erika “dearest.” Her sweet behavior was straight out of a classic shoujo novel, and it brought a slight blush to Erika’s face. While she did feel happy about it, it was also considerably embarrassing.

“Good grief, just look at how peppy she is after everything that’s happened. I wonder whom she takes after.”

Claus’ arms were loaded with the flowers Anne had picked out. The spirit of adventure had yet to depart from her, and today she was especially merciless.

Erika, on the other hand, was barely there; she followed Anne’s orders in a daze, mechanically cutting roses and handing them to Claus. Before he knew it, Claus was hoisting up an outrageous amount.

More than three times what Claus was holding had already been delivered to Anne’s rooms. In all seriousness, the garden could end up fully harvested. Erika thought little of it, as if she considered it someone else’s business.

“She’s just like you, Claus. Simply brimming with curiosity. She’ll do whatever she’s set her mind to. You’re two peas in a pod. Oh, but you do lack her courteousness.”

“Oi, Erika, what the hell did... Err, Lady Erika, what might you be referring to?”

“Dear me, Sir Claus. Gaze out and behold all the large-flowered roses that surround us.”

Erika smiled superficially and blatantly changed the topic.

Haha, human ears are attuned to pick up insults. What a bother.

Erika averted her eyes from his pouting face and snipped a light crimson rose

that had caught her eye. To both distract and tease him, she adorned his hair with the flower.

With both his hands occupied, Claus had no way to avoid it.



Keeping a composed look on her face, Erika internally burst into laughter. The beautiful rose suited his dignified features surprisingly well.

“Oh, it’s perfect, Claus.”

“What are you doing?! Remove it at once!”

Claus’ cheeks flushed with shame as he frantically shook his head to jostle it free. Unfortunately, the stalk was tangled rather fiercely, so it wasn’t coming out.

“What do we have here? Claus, you’re looking adorable today.”

“Oh! Eduard! Welcome back!”

“Geh! Eduard’s here?!”

With exquisite timing, Eduard appeared from between the hedges. He was wearing the same clothes as when he left, the leather briefcase that served as his Wunderkammer in his hand. He carried himself with the usual grace and elegance, but there was fatigue etched onto his face. Like Erika and Claus, he had likely been up all night.

“Ngh...! Stop! Don’t look at me, you cretin!”

Claus hid his face behind the bundle of flowers. Try as he might, he completely failed to hide his ears, which had turned bright red.

Still, you don’t have to put it like that, Claus. Erika giggled as she gave him a sidelong glance.

“There’s no need to hide it. It’s quite beautiful, you know.” Eduard casually spouted such incendiary lines while reaching a hand toward the bouquet.

Claus promptly whipped around and started running away from the Aurelian siblings.

“Grrr! You’d better remember this, Eduard Aurelia! One day I’ll clear my name of this disgrace, just you wait!” Leaving a needlessly embarrassing parting remark, Claus fled in Anne’s direction. Was it really so embarrassing to be seen by Eduard with a rose in his hair? Perhaps it was simply inevitable, given how he had arbitrarily decided Eduard was his rival.

Once Claus was gone, Eduard's smirk melted away, and he faced Erika with a look of gentle concern.

"I came as fast as I could once I got the messenger owl... I'm so sorry, Erika. I hear you almost died from the trap I set."

"No worries. It was safely dispelled, so I'm quite alright."

Erika averted her eyes. She couldn't quite tell him that his extremely powerful death trap had ultimately saved her life. While she couldn't divulge the truth, she did feel deeply indebted to him.

"More than that, I'm sorry for making a mess of all the tools you'd saved for exploration."

"Don't worry about it. Father told me about what happened yesterday. The tools I left behind helped my dear sister return alive. Why, I couldn't be more proud of my creations." With a soft smile, Eduard knelt down to match her eye level.

"Eduard, you..."

You really are kind. She felt warmth blooming in the depths of her heart. Unfortunately, with his very next words, his angelic smile contorted into something more sinister.

"But if you could please tell me exactly who used what and how much of it—as far as you can remember, of course—I would be sincerely grateful."

"Erm, what do you intend to do with that information?"

"It's a secret. Don't worry, I won't cause you any trouble, Erika."

Eduard held an index finger in front of his lips, which were curled in a dark, elegant grin. Erika could somewhat read his intentions.



He's definitely billing Claus for the cost of the potions and scrolls. This must be what they mean when they say "when it rains, it pours." Misfortunes never come singly.

Erika pitied the boy. When Eduard's invoice arrived, Claus might have to sell off one of the forests he was arranged to inherit. Erika decided she would beg her brother to at least wait until the poor boy was older. Eventually, after Claus took over the post of Duke Hafan, he could endeavor to increase his territory's assets in order to make up for the loss.

Still, what do I do now? Erika hesitated. Was she better off telling her family what had happened that night in the Seafarer's Ruins? The very existence of the monster Zaratan would become a scandal throughout all of Aurelia.

She fell silent, thinking over it carefully, so Eduard tactfully changed the subject.

"Come to think of it, you know how I've been secretly sneaking into the ruins? I never found what I was looking for."

"What might that have been?"

"A friend of mine was looking through some references, and according to him, the remains of a giant monster may sleep at the deepest depths of the Seafarer's Ruins."

"O-Oh, hmm, is that so? I've never heard of such a thing."

Erika trembled with fear as Eduard brazenly reached the heart of the matter. It was no more than a coincidence, surely, but she broke into a cold sweat, wondering if she would be able to keep her secrets.

"Considering the distribution of star crystal and starsteel deposits in the surrounding soil, he said that the ruins may have been constructed at the center of a life-form five kilometers across. And that was his conservative estimate."

"Wow, that large?"

"It sounds like a dream, right?"

The Zaratan *had* said it spanned an entire city. But to think the monster was

over five kilometers wide... That was far larger than Erika had anticipated.

I'm glad it was still small when we met it.

If they'd had to face the living Zaratan, they wouldn't have stood a chance. It was understandable why the ancient alchemists had used a last resort like the Sailor's Song wand to take it down.

"Right, right. I doubt you'll go to the ruins again, but if you do end up getting lost in there, you definitely can't go beyond the seventh floor."

"Is something there?"

"There was a nest of formidable monsters on the eighth floor. While we barely managed to wipe them out, the magic we used was just a bit too large in scale, and unfortunately, we delivered drastic damage to the structural integrity of the maze. Worst-case scenario, the entire floor could collapse."

"Th-That sure sounds dangerous."

"I'm still debating with my fellow researchers on whether we should do some repair work or just dig a tunnel so we can keep exploring. Whichever we decide, we'll be going beyond the scope of what we can keep a secret from Father, you see. I'll have to arrange an official expedition team from Lindis."

If there would be such a team, Eduard was guaranteed to be a part of it.

How am I supposed to explain this one away?

One little slip-up and her perceptive brother would immediately pick up on it. Erika chose her next words carefully.

"Come to think of it, when we were exploring last night, we heard a terrible crash, almost like the floor below us was breaking apart."

"Ah, then maybe it has already caved in. That leaves the tunnel idea, I guess. I wonder what could have caused it. Did I overlook some mechanism linking it to the other floors? I thought I'd conducted a pretty thorough search."

This was going just as Erika feared, and she hurriedly attempted to shift the topic at hand.

"I say, Eduard, it's amazing that such a large animal can exist!"

“Oh, did it catch your interest?”

“Yes, I find it *very* intriguing.”

Erika nodded. Not only was she intrigued, she had met the creature in question.

“It all stems from the story of the alchemist Jasconius, commonly called the Legend of Zaratan. You’ve heard it too, haven’t you? But what *was* Zaratan? Was it just another name for Jasconius? There’s a theory that ‘Zaratan’ might have actually been the name of the giant creature.”

“The people of Lindis have some crazy ideas...”

“Of course, there’s also the theory that it was an ancient energy-producing facility embedded with space-manipulation mechanisms, the theory that it was the name of a secret organization, and the theory that it was a visitor from the stars.”

“Err, what about the giant monster version?”

The conversation was about to be frightfully derailed, so Erika urged him back on track.

“Yeah, there are a few legends to support that.” Eduard hesitated for a moment. While he kept the same gentle smile, an air of sadness was budding beneath it.

“There are a number of discrepancies between the official record of Jasconius passed down throughout Aurelia—the lonesome Zaratan who made the philosopher’s stone—and the stories passed down in Aurelia’s oldest houses.”

“I only know of Zaratan from the books in the study.”

“Yeah. But the one you read was actually a hidden legend unique to House Aurelia. In our version, Zaratan was killed by the magic that causes stars to fall to earth, right? You haven’t received a formal education yet, but elsewhere they say he was killed with a knife in his sleep.”

Erika was taken aback. According to the Zaratan itself, it had been killed after it passed out from exhaustion. Regardless, she couldn’t believe the fact that the hidden truth of the Zaratan’s murder, which was supposed to be taboo, was still

publicly taught in modern times.

“I have a friend who loves those sorts of stories, you see,” Eduard continued. “At first, I was just helping him out, but before I knew it, I was even more invested than he was. Our ancestor was known to be a man of few words, but maybe he left something for his distant descendants to discover... or something like that. Doesn’t it sound interesting?”

“Eduard, do you know what happened to this Zaratan?”

“Parts of the legend have been lost, so it isn’t complete, but...”

With that, he launched into an old story.

The ancestors of modern-day Aurelians once lived in a land far beyond the distant seas, where the stars shined brilliantly across the sky. But one day, a disaster or some other incident drove them away from their homeland.

As they sailed across the endless seas, an old and powerful alchemist named Jasconius took it upon himself to create a single, artificial life-form.

The being was called the Zaratan.

Over many long months and years, the Zaratan grew and grew until he was as large as an island, and once their ships had deteriorated with age, the creature happily carried the lost voyagers on his back.

A city was built on the Zaratan’s shell, and over time, the Zaratan’s bones slowly developed into valuable ores, which were now called star crystal and starsteel.

Their voyage was so long that a generation came and went. Eventually, the travelers reached a new land called Ichthyes.

On that day, a group of some of the leading alchemists killed the Zaratan after all its hard work. They also killed the son—or perhaps daughter—of the late Jasconius before the child could protest. They were after the philosopher’s stone, thought to be hidden somewhere inside the Zaratan’s body.

But no matter how they dissected the great beast, the philosopher’s stone was nowhere to be found.

The conspirators who had plotted the Zaratan’s murder fled to the ends of

the earth. The alchemists who remained trembled at the deeds of their former comrades, filled with regret as though they themselves had committed the terrible crimes.

They respectfully entombed Jasconius' child deep within the body of the Zaratan. They built a deep labyrinth to protect them and to make sure no one could disturb the sleep of these two unfortunate souls ever again.

Jasconius' youngest brother survived, married the daughter of a different leading faction not involved in the murder, and became the new chief of the Seafaring Tribe. Thus, House Aurelia was born.

"It seems the alchemists broke a certain contract when they killed the homunculus Zaratan. I still don't know what the contract was, though."

"It's a... very sad story."

"I don't know how much of it is true. But I think the truth is hidden somewhere in the ruins. Finding it might be my duty as a descendant of Jasconius. Or something like that, anyway."

Eduard gave a cheerful smile to pep Erika up.

"My theory is that they weren't just entombed—I think they were deified. Maybe, just maybe, Jasconius and the Zaratan were fused together to form the cornerstone for our founding god, Brean."

"So the Zaratan became a god..."

"I'd be able to back up that theory if I could just find an altar to Brean somewhere in the ruins. But if the labyrinth did indeed collapse, it will be years before we can conduct a real investigation."

Erika tried comparing it to knowledge from her past life. *Perhaps this case is similar to that of the scholar Sugawara no Michizane or the samurai Taira no Masakado. These two were both normal people in their respective times, but they eventually came to be revered as deities.*

The Zaratan had cursed humans, despised them, yet it had been venerated as their god. Betrayed, murdered, then deified.

No wonder I resonated with him. Unreasonably betrayed, absurdly killed; why,

he's a bit like I was in my past life. And we were both victims of blunt-force trauma to boot.

Erika laughed powerlessly. Though there was quite a difference between a meteor and the crowbar that had sent her to the hospital in high school, she tentatively considered them kindred spirits.

“By the way, Erika, is that golem made of starsteel? When did you make it?”

“Golem?! What golem?!”

Erika looked down at her feet in a panic. An armored doll about the size of a largish stuffed animal quietly stared back at her.

When did it start following me? Erika endeavored not to let her befuddlement reach her face as she opened her mouth to answer.

“Y-Yes, well, yesterday I ended up invoking *met* on your acid golem, so I wanted to reuse its core...”

“Ahaha. Don’t worry too much about it. I can make another acid-hydrogel golem whenever I want.”

Eduard smiled broadly, giving her some peace of mind.

“You can’t imagine how relieved I am to hear that.”

“But a starsteel golem, eh? You really thought this through. It can change shape with mana to a certain extent, which should allow for natural, lifelike motions. Right?”

“Erm, right! That’s just what I was thinking!”

“Interesting stuff. Oh, and what’s this? Does it have a two-layered construction?”

“Lalalala! That’s top-secret technology! It’s still experimental!”

Erika hurriedly blocked Eduard’s view. She had intended to play it off but inadvertently had made him even more interested. Her eyes were now teary, and she was at her limit.

Just before Erika threw in the towel, Eduard took a look at the clock. “Oh, it’s already this late...”

Looks like he's not going to pursue the matter, Erika thought as she patted her chest in relief.

"For now, I'll go back to my workshop. I'm sure you turned it inside out, after all."

"Erk... I, umm..."

"When you've calmed down, I'll tell you about that necklace. We learned something *very* interesting about it. See you again soon, Erika."

With that, Eduard walked off. Erika leaked a sigh once he was out of sight.

When she looked down again, she saw the back of the starsteel golem's head. Of course, it wasn't *actually* a golem. It was simply a certain something wearing a small suit of armor made of starsteel.

Erika struck up a conversation with the pseudo-golem.

"Why did you follow me?"

"I was perturbed."

"By what?"

"Why did you let me live?"

"Sympathy, perhaps?"

"I detest your sympathy. You could never understand how I feel."

"I guess not."

A short silence passed between the girl and the beast.

After the curse-dispelling ceremony, Claus had given Erika the vial the Zaratan was sealed in. "Do whatever you want with it," he'd said. Erika had done just that, immediately releasing the seal.

"However, I happened to hear something nice."

"What my brother said, you mean?"

"Yes."

Transparent tears spilled out from the black void within.

"She didn't betray me. She was killed, too."

"Sounds like it. Though it's just a legend."

"Am I..."

"Yes?"

"...Am I allowed to cry for her?" the Zaratan asked, though it was unclear whether or not it realized it was already crying.

"Of course." Erika nodded.

While the seal was being undone, the influence of Claus' spatial compression magic had made the Zaratan even smaller than before.

A misshapen dragon the size of a cat; that was how Erika would best describe it.

The creature had scales as black as a moonless night sky, two curling horns like a ram, and sharp, jagged fangs that came in multiple rows like a shark's. Its toes were webbed, topped off by short and sharp claws. The scales on its back were especially thick and formed a sort of shell.

Perhaps this was how it had looked when it was still young. Its head and forearms were large, while its tail and upper arms were short. In its current form, its body proportions really were like a teddy bear's.

One look at its scales and you would call it a fish. A look at its shell and you would think it a tortoise. It had been called the philosopher's stone, a god, an evil spirit.

But it had never been given a name to call itself. This creature was just a nameless monster. A lonely, little, misshapen black dragon. The only one of its kind.

Erika had worked through the night to make armor for it. The starsteel she'd used could be freely molded when it came in contact with mana. She had also applied some techniques from the process of making a golem, such as carving in markings with her athame. Although Erika could neither construct spells nor concentrate them into items, this was one of the few alchemy practices even she could pull off.

After that, she had released the Zaratan's soul into the armor. This was firstly because she wanted to pass it off as a golem, and secondly because she wanted to contain the Zaratan's infinitely expanding body.

"I thought your revenge was justified. Besides, I wanted to fulfill the contract you made with my ancestors."

"Why? I nearly killed you."

"Sympathy, really. Don't worry, you don't have to understand how I feel."

The Zaratan looked up at Erika. She was looking not at him, but somewhere far in the distance. Noticing the dark shadows cast over her emerald eyes, the Zaratan fell silent for quite some time.

"My revenge is over," it said at last.

"Are you sure?"

"I thought I killed you once. At that moment, my heart was filled with such elation that nothing that came before seemed to matter. You really do resemble her, you know. Truth be told, I didn't really care about Aurelia. I was fine so long as I could kill her. She was special to me. So... it's fine. She's already gone."

"But you really wanted to smash a meteor into her face, didn't you?"

"I'm surprised you could tell."

The small black dragon, over six hundred years old, gave a cheerful laugh from the depths of its armor.

"If I can, I'd still like to fulfill the contract in her place. What do you say?"

"My wish has never changed. Then and now, all I wanted was a friend... and a name."

"Is that really enough?"

"I have yearned for that for hundreds of years now."

"I guess you're right." Erika bent down, brushing her hand against the Zaratan's claws. "Then your name shall be..."

Soon after, the brave and beautiful Hafan siblings returned with roses in tow. A gentle breeze blew across the Spring Palace, which was in full bloom.

And just like that, the curtain lowered on the first adventure of Erika Aurelia.



To Tír na nÓg—

My dear friend, won't you come with me? Far, far beyond the distant sea?

For when we step upon new sand, a new name for our promised land.

Last Chapter: Claus Hafan's Letter

Dear Erika Aurelia,

A month has passed since we returned to Silverbough Castle in Hafan. I still remember the events of the Spring Palace like they happened yesterday. While it has been quite some time, I believe I have finally managed to collect my thoughts satisfactorily enough to send you a letter.

Truth be told, I initially did not think kindly of our visit to Aurelia. Do you remember the talks between my father and Duke Aurelia? Publicly, they were in regards to mine development and forest resources. You may not have noticed, but I heard they were underlaid by a secret discussion about an engagement between you and me.

We would both be forced down the tracks of a political marriage decided by our parents. The way things were going, I was certain I would end up in a depressing, loveless relationship. The daughter of Duke Aurelia would surely be spoiled rotten and intolerable. I was sure of it. Why did I have to take a gaudy, ill-natured woman as my wife? I came with my mind full of such prejudice.

But that could not have been further from the truth. You were far, far stronger than me. No, you cannot even be measured on a scale of strength. Compared to you, I am... what is it, I wonder? I have a hard time putting it into words. The one thing I can say is that this is the first time I have ever met a woman like you.

Getting back on track. Back then, at the dreary depths of the earth, I was not able to do a thing. I was helpless when I was at a standstill from the labyrinth's traps and again when an incomprehensible monster was about to kill my sister.

You were always the one who came to the rescue.

You wholeheartedly thanked me, but you must be mistaken. It is the other way around; I should be the one thanking you.

Thank you for protecting my sister, Anne. If you had not made it in time, I would not have forgiven myself for the rest of my life.

I think I want to become a person who can be your equal. I am far too weak as I am now. So one day, when I have enough strength to look you in the eye, I want to propose to you. For real this time.

Naturally, if you are against it, we can pretend this never happened. But please remember this: you don't have to be mine, but know that I will be yours. If something happens to you, I will rush to your side faster than anyone else. I will protect you, even if it costs me my life.

Your Eternal Shield,

Claus Hafan



"Anne! Wh-Why are you reading someone else's letter?! Who taught you to do that?! Give it back!"

"This is atrocious, Claus! Absolutely no good at all!"

Anne had snatched away the letter Claus had just finished writing in secret. While Claus panicked to reclaim it, Anne had already read it in its entirety. She stopped him right in his tracks before he could flee.

The girl was three years younger than Claus, and he was terrible at dealing with her.

"Claus. Why are you writing such a gauche, stilted letter? I take my eyes off of you for one minute, and you're already off wasting all your effort."

"What part of it is stilted?!"

"Okay, we'll take it one section at a time. Why are you declaring such excessive attachment? Erika will just be creeped out if she receives something like that!"

"Wha... What?!"

"Your feelings are too heavy!"

“So what are you saying I did wrong?!”

Claus hadn't the slightest idea what part of it needed work, but it was clear enough that there was a serious mistake somewhere in the letter. His only lead came in the indignant words of his sister, and he would have to listen well.

Anne was one of his few sources of information about the daughter of Duke Aurelia, after all.

“This came up when I was having a girl talk with Erika...”

“Girl talk? And?”

Claus didn't quite understand what that meant, but he ignored it. Thanks to Erika's influence, Anne had started picking up some peculiar terms, and currently, she was the only one with an actual grasp on their meaning.

When it came to these matters, obeying his sister was a bridge he had to cross.

“I asked what manner of gentleman she preferred. According to her, while she doesn't pine for any specific traits, there are traits she would much rather avoid.”

“Hm. In which case, we can use the process of elimination to infer her actual preferences.”

“Precisely.”

“That's important information. Please continue.”

“Erika dislikes men who arbitrarily shove their emotions onto her. Additionally, she said she was no good with gentlemen who seem favorable at first glance, but who have absolutely no intent to properly communicate.”

“Certainly, I can understand her distaste.”

“It's not just distaste; she says she doesn't want to breathe the same air as them.”

“Are you kidding me?!”

“It's pretty serious.”

“I see...”

Claus secretly recorded the info in a corner of his heart as an item of the utmost importance. Surely Erika had some profound reason for it. There was a possibility she would unequivocally reject him if he carelessly did anything of the sort. Despite his cluelessness on the matter, Claus mulled it over in earnest.

“Also, she wants nothing to do with men who might suddenly bludgeon or stab her from behind...”

“Well, isn’t that obvious?”

Claus was perplexed. His fiancée candidate was only eight; what could she possibly have experienced?

Assassination, maybe? Does that mean someone nearly killed her before? Is that why she sometimes has that dark look in her eyes?

“The world is filled with so many things I know nothing about,” he murmured as his will to protect her grew stronger.

“Our dear Erika looks like she’s kind to everyone, but she’s actually quite the misandrist. In fact, she might even be a misanthropist.”

“What?”

“Ah, I knew it. You’re dense, so you never noticed. It’s because of that smile of hers. It completely masks her true intentions.”

Claus was even more confused than before. He thought back to his time with Erika at the Spring Palace. He wouldn’t say she particularly liked him, but he’d never even considered she might hate him.

The reason being, in most cases, Erika would direct a gentle and reserved smile his way. Was that smile a lie? He shook his head to deny it.

“That’s a smile that will graciously accept anyone, or perhaps she’s showing special courtesy to me and no one else—you couldn’t possibly have thought that, could you?” Anne sharply catechized him.

“Ngh...”

“That’s the sort of smile that won’t let anyone shrink the distance beyond a certain point.”

“Are you serious...?”

“Even when she seems to be having fun surrounded by loads of people, did you notice how she secretly sends a lonely look into the distance?”

“Yeah. I picked up on that much, at least.”

“Wonderful! You just barely passed, Claus!”

Rather than lonely, it felt more like she was zoning out. That’s how Claus saw it, anyway, but he wouldn’t dare say that aloud. At times like these, it was flat-out impossible to beat his sister with words.

As he was thinking over such things, Anne closed in with a serious look in her eyes. Indeed, her stare was so stern that it made her brother retreat ever so slightly.

“As your little sister, I will be overjoyed if Erika becomes my sister-in-law.”

“Uh-huh...”

“So how about you work a bit harder, Claus? You haven’t gotten serious about this yet, have you?”

“Right...”

“I guess I’ll permit your spinelessness for now.”

“Well, good thing I have your permission.”

Not that I need it! he screamed in his head, trembling at the unfairness of the world.

“Yes, your being a scaredy-cat is still okay for now. You still have the advantage of time.”

“What are we fighting against?”

“What do you mean, ‘we’?! *You’re* the one who should be taking the initiative in this battle!”

“Right...”

Claus cowered just a bit in the face of Anne’s threatening aura. *Looks like I’m just generally bad with women.*

“So, uh, can you tell me what you mean?”

“Our dear Erika is extremely beautiful.”

“Mgh... Well, you’re not wrong. She’s... decently pretty, I guess.”

“Huh?! Look me in the eye, and say that again.”

“Why do I have to?”

Losing his nerve, Claus finally averted his eyes from his sister. Anne gave a mischievous smirk the moment her bothersome brother wasn’t looking.

“Give her a few years, and Erika will be gorgeous and downright bewitching, like a large rose in bloom. By then, you’ll be too late with your half-baked attitude. Do you really understand, Claus?”

“What will be too late?”

“When Erika reaches adulthood, she will inherit the vast tracts of land left by her late mother. She’ll inherit a number of Aurelia’s plentiful silver veins. Add that to her extraordinary beauty, and what do you think will happen?”

“Please, do tell.”

He would do anything in his power to marry her, even if she were an illiterate peasant. What did her status matter? At least, those were the intentions Claus wanted to get across, but Anne’s reaction betrayed his expectations.

“The girl’s prime real estate! She’ll be in great demand! You’ll have rivals all over the continent!”

“Say what?”

“For example, Margrave Harlan of Urs will definitely be after her.”

“For real?! He’s twenty-six years older than she is!”

Going on thirty-five, Lucanlandt’s Margrave of Urs was the topic of numerous bloody, unsavory rumors. Allegedly, he abducted women of his fief, even wives with husbands, and slaughtered them. To top it all off, he deliberately surrounded himself with the young daughters of the subordinates and citizens he had murdered. One live-in maid had been tormented so mercilessly that she’d cast her body into the sea in less than two months.

This thorny gossip was all that was said of him.

In desolate regions that lay in the gray area between rule of law and rule of man, barbarous acts like the abduction of women by nobles weren't all that rare. That being said, Harlan had simply killed too many, too often.

"Apart from him, there's also His Highness, Crown Prince August of Ignitia. He's ten, same as you. He might be your biggest rival."

"What?! That blasted August?! I won't allow it!"

Ignitia's Prince August was yet another source of terrible rumors.

He was born of the queen's infidelity and raised without love. Without pure royal blood running through his veins, he could neither ride nor receive the blessings of Ignitia's guardian dragons. Prince August was so selfish and foolish that even his closest attendants had completely given up on him. The bishops all foretold that should he ever take a throne, an era of darkness would descend upon the world.

However, Anne had never heard of any clear, distinct victims of August's tyranny. It was her personal philosophy not to be too negative toward him on rumor alone.

Her views on this matter were largely influenced by her experience with Erika. Rumor had it that Erika would grow up to be an arrogant, vile woman like the late duchess, but after meeting her in person, Anne thought she seemed perfectly harmless.

Not that any of this mattered, as she was simply using August as tinder to kindle her brother's flames.

I know they're uncertain, but I'll just use the rumors to the fullest, she smirked.

There were many nobles out there she personally didn't want to marry, but few that Claus would know of.

"With Prince August, even if she becomes queen, she won't find any happiness."

"Right. I would reluctantly give my blessing as long as she would be happy, but... if he only brings her sorrow, that's another story."

“That being the case, Prince August may one day become the ruler of our united kingdoms. On the off chance he *is* engaged to Erika, and you try to steal her back, there’s no telling what will happen to us.”

Claus scowled. That would make for civil war. It was something he had to avoid. Otherwise, for what reason had their old monarchy endured the disgrace of submitting to Ignitia and becoming its retainers?

“But why are you so knowledgeable about nobles outside of Hafan?”

“Because it directly concerns me.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“If Hafan’s political standing gets worse, I might be forced to marry the margrave or the prince.”

“I won’t allow it.”

“Your will has nothing to do with it.”

“No matter what happens, I won’t allow it. In the first place, you’re always prattling on about your ideal man or—”

“Enough about me!”

Incidentally, while Anne was so harsh on him, her ideal man was none other than her unsociable brother. He had no courtesy, was a poor speaker, and could never be honest with himself, but Anne knew his awkward kindness better than anyone. She understood that he grew so indignant when she brought up these unsavory marriage candidates because he sincerely wished for his sister’s happiness.

Truth be told, the one with the greatest antipathy toward Claus’ engagement had been Anne herself—though she was also the first one Erika Aurelia had managed to win over. The clincher was when she was first being shown around the garden. Erika’s face hadn’t betrayed the slightest bit of reluctance at Anne’s intentionally childish act. On top of that, Erika never forgot to display modest consideration. By that point, Anne had already appraised Erika to be a tolerant, virtuous woman and thought she might be able to leave her brother Claus to someone like her.

Her conjecture turned to conviction during the events in the depths of the Seafarer's Ruins, which hardly required explanation.

"If the relationship between Hafan and Aurelia strengthens, I will have some more freedom with my own marriage."

"You're right. It does directly concern you."

"So you need to establish normal communication! Not too clingy, not too shallow; just the right level! Get your goodwill across!"

"Y-Yeah..."

Claus averted his eyes from Anne's sharp glare. He had always been dull to his own feelings, and he was naturally unsociable. How much would he have to mold and dress up his heart before he could write moderately natural sentences? He hadn't the slightest idea.

"You're making a face that says 'it's embarrassing, and I don't want to do it.'"

"Urp."

"Now you're making a face that says 'this is hard, and it's a pain.'"

"I'm not. I'm definitely not. Rest at ease."

"Then rewrite it to be a little softer and lighter, but make sure your love gets across without fail!"

"Hold on, now! L-Love?!"

Dense as he was, he didn't even fully understand his feelings toward Erika. He had essentially fallen in love at first sight, and the emotions fluttering around in his chest were what had caused him to bark at her in irritation when he'd met her for the first time.

Now that a definitive word had finally been given to his hazy emotions, Claus became even more deeply conscious of Erika. Additionally, the fact that it just *had* to be his sister who'd figured it out caused him to turn defiant.

"Are you saying it isn't?"

"It's not! Definitely, definitely not!"

"Ah, for crying out loud! You just don't know when to give up!"

For some time, the beautiful Silverbough Palace resounded with Anne's scolds and Claus' screams.



About a month and a half after the incident, a single letter was delivered to Erika.

It was written on high-quality vellum and addressed from Claus Hafan.

"A letter from the black-haired child?" the voice came from the black dragon Zaratan—now named Tirnanog—who had grown quite accustomed to living with Erika.

Ultimately, even after slipping out of the armor that bound him, Tirnanog did not show any particular aggression. At the moment, he was in the middle of bathing, carefree, in a basin of hot water.

"Yes, that's right. We got a gift from Anne, too."

"Oh, an offering. I expect no less from the woman who managed to wound me. She shows promise."

"Offering...? Is this an offering? Hmm, well, maybe it is."

"May I open it?"

"Yes, go ahead."

With Erika's permission, Tirnanog brought his bathtime to an end and gleefully began ripping away at the packaging.

"A pig's thigh! Splendid!"

"Wow... it's a top-quality dry-aged ham. How considerate."

The ankle of the leg was wrapped with a label bearing the crest of Duke Hafan. It was a rare gem that had been given ample time to cure.

I see, no wonder it was so big and heavy.

Erika vaguely recalled that Hafan was famous for its pigs, which engorged themselves on the plentiful acorns of its forests, and its calves, which were raised on soft white clover.

“May I eat it?”

“Yes, of course. But do leave some for me.”

“Trust in me. I have never left a friend to starve.”

Was it okay for a lady like herself to be so excited about meat? Erika hesitated for a moment, but she quickly chose to ignore her misgivings. Whatever the case, anyone who gave meat as a gift couldn't be a bad person.

Oblivious to Erika's inner conflict, Tirnanog took a large, hearty bite of the ham.

“Now let's look at the letter,” said Erika as she undid the seal.



While she initially lowered her eyes to the page with a laid-back smile, her expression gradually clouded over. Once she was done reading, her gaze wandered through the open air, a meek look on her face.

Tirnanog lifted his head from the haunch once he noticed something was wrong.

“What is the matter?”

After holding her forehead a while as if she were plagued by a headache, she showed the vellum to the dragon.

“You are strong. I will become a man who won’t lose to you. Please, wait for me...”

“What do you think?”

“He is challenging you to combat.”

“I see, so I wasn’t just imagining it.”

“The boy’s a tough one, but I’m sure you can win. I can tell.”

“No, that’s not what I meant...”

The genius magician of the east saw her as a rival. That much Erika could understand. She had absolutely no idea what she had done wrong. Maybe, just maybe, this was a new death flag.

And here I thought we’d become friends.

All this time, Erika had thought Claus was the first real friend of the opposite sex she’d ever made, past life included.

Erika nibbled on her bottom lip. Her distrust of humanity went up by yet another level that day.

Reflections of Eduard Aurelia

It was the Lake Palace where the household of Duke Aurelia would spend their summers and winters. Eduard had come home for winter break, and as per usual, he had holed himself up in his study.

He flipped through page after page, slumped down on the plush armchair in front of the fireplace. His research pertained to the tales surrounding the Seafaring Tribe.

Just as he lifted his head upon finishing his second volume, he heard a knock at the door. He opened it to find his little sister, Erika, twelve years younger than himself.

“Oh, Erika. Did you come to play?”

“Might I borrow a book, Eduard?”

“Yes, of course. You can read whatever you want, whenever you want.”

She was still only five years old, but lately she would often come to Eduard’s study to play. While there were many rare and valuable books in the study, Eduard needn’t worry; Erika was not the sort of girl who would ever dog-ear the books or treat them roughly.

“Then, can I borrow this one?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Erika had taken out an illustrated reference book about phantasmic beasts. It was quite a thick and heavy tome, but Erika hoisted it up and teetered her way to the loveseat across from Eduard’s preferred reading spot.

She always selected books far too difficult for her reading level, laying them open and staring at them intently. Eduard was ever open to field any questions she had, but perhaps she didn’t want to take up his time; instead, she gazed at her books alone and in silence. And after squinting at the pages awhile, she would fall asleep.

About an hour after Erika came in, Eduard heard the snap of the wood splitting in the fireplace. He saw that Erika was once again snoring away peacefully, leaned against the backrest.

Soft, squishy cheeks. Full, golden eyelashes. A half-open mouth.

As he observed his young sister, Eduard could feel his expression soften at her sheer adorableness.

I thought Erika took after Mother, but maybe she takes after Father after all.

Indeed, while her features closely resembled their mother's, her reserved personality more closely resembled their father's. For some bizarre reason, Erika seemed to fancy herself a selfish, spoiled girl, but Eduard simply couldn't see her like that.

She was a quiet girl who liked happy endings and being immersed in her own thoughts. Perhaps she really did take after Ernst, their calm and even-tempered father.

At least, Eduard hoped that was the case. Their mother had been a truly selfish woman. Lively, wild, and reckless, she'd lived her life to the fullest, completely unhinged until the day her past caught up to her and she perished.

While Eduard looked identical to their father in his younger years, he was sure he had inherited her nature.

It had been two years since she died, and with each passing day, he grew increasingly certain he would one day be just like her. Lately, he had learned to hide his true feelings behind a smile, but he was far from calm. He was egotistical and curious, and he must have gotten that from her.

If this keeps up, I may be enticed by death, just like Mother.

His father had forbidden any investigation into their mother's cause of death, yet the desire would never disappear from the deepest corners of his soul. Investigating in secret had led Eduard to the mysterious death of his uncle. Then the bizarre deaths and disappearances of his mother's closest friends. And finally, to his mother herself.

He had grasped at a number of threads, but they were all so dubious, he

didn't know what could be trusted.

"Eduard...?" the girl's voice returned him to his senses before he could be taken by such dark thoughts. Erika had woken up when he wasn't looking, and she was peering at him closely with worry all over her face.

For a moment, Eduard closed his eyes and softened his expression. Right, he had to be smiling and at ease. Always.

"Oh, hello, Erika. Did you have a nice nap?"

"Yes. I'm sorry for always being like this."

"No need. Whether it's reading or sleeping, you can do what you wish."

"I'm sorry, Eduard. You lent me such a wonderful book, and I fell asleep."

"I can't blame you for feeling sleepy when you're always reading such difficult books."

And my heart feels lighter when you're around, Eduard added to himself with a smile. *If possible, I'd love to take a load off of your heart as well.*

For two years now, ever since their mother's death, Erika had been experiencing nightmares. She would daydream from time to time, and she frequently muttered peculiar words. She took care not to show it, but she was still so young.

She must be unstable, Eduard thought.

It was also around that time that she began to prefer difficult books.

Their father suggested that perhaps the memories of her past life had failed to wash away in the river of oblivion. The Seafaring Tribe had a peculiar view of life and death, and past-life memories were seen as a good omen.

If he was right, Erika's state was to be lauded, not shunned. But no matter the reason, Eduard was sure this was a burden too great for his little sister. A human life was wrought with both weal and woe, and surely it wasn't just good times to be remembered.

For now, I'll talk about whatever interests her to help her forget, Eduard thought as he took a peek at the page Erika had open.

“You’re reading *The Illustrated Book of Monsters* today. That’s a tough one. Can you understand it?”

“Yes, it’s very interesting.”

Eduard smiled wider as he sensed the shimmers of intrigue in the depths of her eyes. *Come to think of it, I couldn’t get enough of phantasmic beasts when I was a kid*, he recalled.

“I’m glad you like it. I happen to love those sorts of books too! So, what phantasmic beast do you like the most, Erika? The unicorn, perhaps? Or maybe the dragon?”

Apparently, small girls generally took a liking to the more horse-like beasts, but thanks to Ignitia’s influence, dragons were very popular in this country.

Erika had to think for quite a while before she could answer Eduard’s question.

“Mmnn. Unicorns are wonderful, but I think I like dragons more.”

“They’re pretty neat, after all. Next time I return, do you want me to borrow *The Complete Guide to Known Dragon Subspecies*?”

“I’d love that, thank you!”

Eduard knew a friend who was very knowledgeable about dragons. The man in question would undoubtedly be happy to lend it to him.

In the end, Eduard and Erika didn’t read any more that day. Instead, they had a fun chat about all the wondrous creatures which inhabited the world.



The next day, Erika stopped by Eduard’s study again. Once more, she opened a thick book atop the usual loveseat.

Eduard took a peek at her new field of study.

“You’ve picked a book on alchemy today. Are you interested in wands?”

“I am.”

“They’re made of beautiful stones, so they must be fun to look at.”

“Yes. The tips and wicks are fun, too.”

Her book was open to a page detailing the composition of all sorts of wands. Eduard was impressed that she understood something so complex.

He carefully took out a wand he had gone through great efforts to make and proudly held it out for her to see.

“When I was a child, I always wanted a fancy wand like this one.”

“Ah! Eduard, that’s an Urðr-Sight wand, isn’t it?”

“Oh? You could tell just by looking at it?” Eduard’s eyes widened.

The wand’s elaborate design did make it hard to mistake for any other, but no normal five-year-old child should’ve been able to name it. Not only was it outrageously rare and expensive, but it was also of little renown. It was different from commonly known wands like Glámr-Sight.

Eduard was shocked that his little sister had identified it so easily.

“Yes,” Erika replied. “It’s a wand that an alchemist can’t make alone. He would need a skilled magician to make the wick for him.”

“That’s right. Don’t tell me you’ve memorized that entire book?”

“No. Just what I’ve been taught.”

“Hmm, I see.”

“And I only know the most common combination of materials to make it.”

“Then, what about this one?” he asked, pulling out another.

“Oh, that one I know.”

Whatever wand he took out, Erika would fluently list the type and composition.

Eduard stared at the young child, not quite knowing what to say. It wasn’t easy to memorize the composition of over thirty wands at her age. Had their father hired a talented, enthusiastic home tutor for her?

It was at times like these that Eduard would feel somewhat suspicious, but he made sure his thoughts never lingered.



The day after that, Erika was in Eduard's study again.

"Oh dear, it's a book on golems today? Are you interested in that too?"

"Eduard, I want to know how to make a golem!"

"You already want to make your own?"

Eduard was surprised to hear such an aggressive request from his usually reserved sister. What's more, she wasn't asking for something pretty like a wand; she was asking for a comparatively plain golem. Sure, golems were very useful tools to alchemists, but it was rare for them to hold the interest of a young girl.

"They're cute, just like dolls... Is that strange?"

"No, you're fine. Do you know the language for golems?"

"Err... yes! I do!"

The current golem description method was based on a set of seventy-two letters. These letters could be interpreted through seven different systems, and each system had seven different forms of syntax. That meant there were forty-nine ways to describe an action for a golem. The systems ranged from easily legible to highly obfuscated, with the syntaxes divided by use into ones suited for industrial work, ones suited for beginners, and many more.

With seventy-two letters, it was possible to describe practically any golem one could imagine.

"For starters, I want to know how much of it you understand, Erika. Could you try writing out a description that will make a golem walk?"

The process to walk was the most basic one, and it was the first lesson for beginners. It could be described in five letters.

Erika began writing her answer on the notepad Eduard had opened for her. She went through the first page, then continued on to the second. Erika spent far longer writing than Eduard had anticipated.

"Are you done, Erika?"

“Yes, I think I have it! Will this work?”

“This is...”

The pages were filled with five of the seven systems, all seven syntaxes of each. Erika had described thirty-five out of forty-nine methods to make a golem walk. Absurd for any ordinary child.

“I’m sorry. That’s all I could think of, but I don’t know which one is right.”

“They’re all correct. I can’t believe you described thirty-five walking processes correctly...”

“Hm?”

“Err, nothing. You just surprised me a bit. You’re amazing, Erika.”

“I learned a lot when I was little, though I don’t really remember those times very well,” Erika said, smiling like she was recalling a happy memory.

It was at that point that Eduard finally noticed. There was no way that father of theirs would have forced such a niche and fragmentary education onto his daughter. Then who could have taught her? Only one individual came to mind.

Their late mother, reputed to be an oddball, had secretly given special lessons to his little sister. Perhaps she’d taught her the seventy-two letters alongside the spoken language when the girl was still an infant. The wand composition was surely the same.

Maybe Erika only read the books in the study to confirm the knowledge she already remembered.

It has to be that woman’s fault.

This was clearly not normal. Eduard couldn’t hide his shock at the devil’s brainwashing his sister had undergone, but he would feel sorry for her if he acted so flustered right where she could see.

Eduard got a grip on his conflicted emotions and softly smiled.

“Alright! Golems can take on all shapes and sizes, but I’ll show you the simplest one.”

She’s looking forward to it, so making a small golem for Erika comes first. I can

confirm our mother's deed later, Eduard decided. They moved to the desk in the study and got right to work.

Eduard took a small ostrakon shard from the drawer and passed it to Erika.

"Use the athame to carve letters into the ceramic. Mold the clay into whatever shape you want, but leave two holes in it. The shard goes into the first one..."

Erika started working just as Eduard instructed. She dexterously maneuvered the athame, a silver blade much like a butter knife, carving letters into the ceramic surface.

While she was doing that, Eduard took a box of clay from his leather bag. Erika was done carving the correct letters by the time he had it ready for her to use.

"Yes, that looks good."

"So I need to mold this into a human shape?"

"That's right."

Erika delicately shaped her simple golem. As Eduard had told her, she left a large hole in its chest and a smaller hole in its stomach. Once she had made a clay doll about the size of her palm, she finally embedded the pottery shard into its chest.

"Next, you must breathe in your blessing. Give it just a little mana."

"Mana?"

"Maybe that's a bit difficult to understand. Watch how I do it."

Eduard blew a soft gust of air over the doll. It immediately rattled to life, walked three steps, and stopped.

"Aaah!"

"Now, if I light this small candle and put it in the hole... voilà!"

Eduard used his oil lamp to set a small wax candle alight, then inserted it into the golem's stomach. Step by step, the earth-colored doll began to march along the desk. It moved almost like a living being, bringing sparkles to Erika's eyes.

“That’s incredible, Eduard!”

“A description, a blessing, and heat. That’s all you need for a golem to move. Those are just the basics, though. Of course, there are all sorts of applications.”

Inevitably, the golem reached the edge and fell. Its soft clay splattered as it hit the floor. Erika hurried to salvage it, but the candle inside had been snuffed out.

“It can’t think and decide to stop on its own?”

“You’re not allowed to incorporate that sort of thing. You may only give a golem imperative and conditional statements.”

In all actuality, if they made use of an artificial spirit created through Hafan technology, it would be possible to imitate thought. An artificial spirit, as the name implied, was a spirit made by a magician to mimic the ones found in nature. While the craft allowed for imitations of thought and memory, the production of golems that included these had been banned for hundreds of years now.

“Otherwise,” Eduard continued, “it would make having an incorrect description much more dangerous. Besides, if the golems thought and moved on their own, they would take jobs from lots and lots of people.”

“I see. You know everything, Eduard.”

Lovingly sheltering the broken golem in her palm, Erika looked up at Eduard with eyes of admiration. Such undue reverence caused him to feel a little awkward.

“No, that’s simply common knowledge. Regardless, it’s all a matter of trial and error. Do you want to play around with the technique some more?”

“Okay! I’ll try doing a bit on my own!”

“Sounds good.”

Erika turned back to the desk, filled with determination, while Eduard took out his remaining boxes of clay so she could make as much as she wanted.

It was apparent that Erika had some grander scheme in mind and, instead of immediately shaping her golems, she took up a piece of chalk and began drawing out blueprints on a small blackboard.

She really is earnest and meticulous, Eduard thought as he watched over her warmly.

“Eduard, you go over there! It’s still a secret! You can’t see!”

“Aww, but then I’ll be lonely. Very well, I’ll take a short break on the sofa. Could you come get me when the golem is done?” With that, Eduard lay his body down and patiently waited.

How many hours had gone by? It hadn’t been his intention, but before he knew it, Eduard had fallen asleep.

I’m not usually this lax. What’s wrong with me today?

Once he awoke from his nap, he surveyed his study. His sister was gone from her station at the writing desk. The two kilograms of clay had been completely used up. He’d had over thirty small pottery fragments, and they were gone as well.

Did Erika really use all of it for her experiments?

The next moment was filled with the echoes of a heavy sound, like a massive hammer striking the earth. Eduard turned to see a huge shadow outside the window. It was a golem.

Is that a miscreation? No, even if it is growing by mistake, it would need to have started out considerably large to reach that size. How did a small girl make that in such a short amount of time?

The large golem was nearing the end of the hedge maze out back. If it had been clumsily put together, it would have smashed straight through the shrubbery that formed the winding corridors of the maze, but the large golem was surprisingly light on its feet.

It’s very well made and frightfully well thought out, Eduard mused as he rushed out and chased after the golem. Along the way, he noticed around thirty smaller golems sitting single-file on the turf.

“That means...”

The limb proportions of the smaller ones closely resembled the first golem

Erika had made. Apparently, Erika had first made the small ones, then employed their services to manufacture the large one. She really did think this through.

Then where is the girl herself? Eduard's eyes wandered when suddenly he heard a voice from on high.

"Eduard! Up here!"

"Oh, there you are, Erika!"

Erika was clutched in the right hand of the golem, and Eduard could hear his heart thrumming in his ears. She was clearly in a dangerous position.

"I simply *had* to try making a large one, and it turned out like this."

"W-Wow, that's incredible. But don't you think you should come down from there?"

"Well, umm, there must have been a mistake in the escape conditions for the walking loop."

"Don't panic. Wait right there!"

It was a common mistake for beginners. She had no control over the large golem, and it simply continued to walk. It would fall into the lake if it wasn't stopped soon.

Eduard immediately threw open the leather bag he always kept within reach and picked out a wand.

Even if I smash it or invoke met, Erika will still be in danger. Hmm... Then what about Castling?

Eduard quickly snatched up one of Erika's small golems near his feet and swung the Castling wand. The warmth he felt in his arms told him he had successfully swapped the small golem for Erika.

"What sort of magic did you use? Oh, a Castling wand."

"Yes, you got it right again."

"Good thinking, Eduard."

Eduard smiled. *Good thinking? I should very well say that about you. Just look*

at what you made.

He embraced his little sister, his eyes filled with a look of pure, childlike admiration. Feeling the warmth of her body up close finally restored composure to his pounding heart.

“Next, we’ll have to do something about that one.”

“Right.”

Eduard drew his Disintegrate wand from the holster at his hip.

The wand’s tip was a regular, dodecahedral magnetite crystal. Its shaft was carved from the axle of a water wheel that had seen over ten years of use. The wick was aqua regia; twenty liters of the potent substance had been compressed with spatial magic. The wand’s surface was engraved with seventeen ancient letters that could no longer be deciphered in the modern era.

“A Disintegrate wand? You’re going to destroy him?”

“Don’t worry. Believe in me. The heat source you used was charcoal from the fireplace, I assume?”

“That’s right.”

Eduard fought to hide his fear, wondering if she knew even the composition of a wand as dangerous as this one.

“Now, let’s see how this works.”

Collecting himself, he carefully took aim at the golem’s back and activated the spell. A black beam that could deconstruct anything in the world pierced through the golem’s abdomen without hitting anything else. He had destroyed its heat source, the charcoal, while keeping the damage to an absolute minimum.

With its driving force gone, the large golem quickly had its heat snatched away by the chilly outside air. At last, it came to a stop.

Eduard extracted the ostracon from the golem and handed it to Erika.

“Thank you so much, Eduard. The Disintegrate wand sure is convenient.”

“Perhaps. But it’s incredibly dangerous, so I can’t let you touch it.”

“Yes, I understand.”

Eduard smiled softly again, not letting his unrest reach the surface.

I should properly report this matter to Father. We have to keep a closer eye on Erika. She might just take after Mother, like me.

If that was the case, he needed to be all the more attentive to make sure his precious sister didn’t end up like their late mother or even himself. At the very least, he would clean and cover up his mother’s trail so Erika could never retrace her footsteps.

In his heart, Eduard knew he would have to find and erase every last trace their mother had left behind at the academy.













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Deathbound Duke's Daughter: Volume 1

by Terasu Senoo

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